UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

# BELLS AND WHISTLES: THE MASS (RE)PRODUCTION OF FEMALE BODIES FOR MALE CONSUMPTION

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

MARIA ORBAN

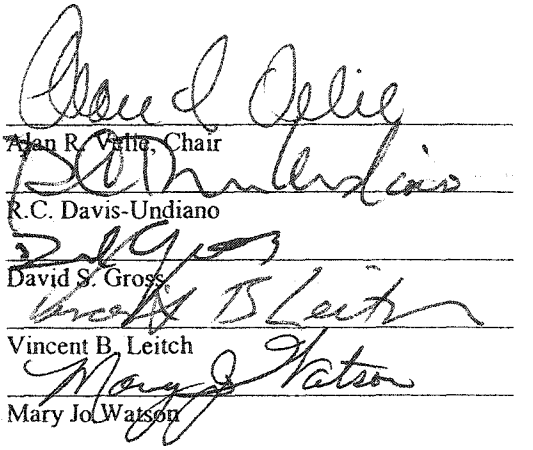
Norman, Oklahoma

2003

BELLS AND WHISTLES: THE MASS (RE)PRODUCTION OF FEMALE BODIES FOR MALE CONSUMPTION

A dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY



Acknowledgements

This dissertation was made possible by several inspiring cultural studies courses taught at the University of Oklahoma by renowned specialists in their field like: Dr. Alan Velie, Dr. R.C. Davis, Dr. Vincent B. Leitch, Dr. Ronald Schleifer, Dr. Daniel Cottom and Dr. Mary Jo Watson.

In writing it I had the great good fortune to benefit from the guidance of an impressive group of scholars and pedagogues. I am grateful to all of them.

I want to express my particular thanks to Dr. Alan Velie who has mentored me throughout my years here for his courses that made me love Native American literature, for his constant support throughout this project and all the vagaries of graduate studies from my first day at this university, and for teaching me the meaning of generosity. For his expertise and encouragement when I needed it most I couldn't be more grateful. My special thanks to his wife, Sue Velie, the most gracious welcoming host one can wish for, and his father Lester Velie an old-school gentleman who is a joy to all those privileged to meet him.

I thank Dr. Robert Con Davis- Undiano, whose American literature courses were truly inspiring, who nurtured every creative idea I ever had and helped it grow to its fruition, who gave me opportunities, as well as the confidence I needed to complete my projects and who supported and encouraged me in all my endeavors.

To Dr. Vincent B. Leitch I am particularly grateful. His invaluable course on Postmodernism opened up new possibilities for my research. His great knowledge of all things " of theory" and his generous support through all the stages of this lengthy project from selecting the topic to the final rewrites I am most grateful for.

Additional support has come from Dr. David Gross who came to my rescue when I needed him most and enabled me to complete my graduate work here.

Dr. Mary Jo Watson has been an inspiration since the day I first saw her. She has been an inspiration as a professor, the impressive breadth of her knowledge only surpassed by her warm and graceful presence, as a Native American, and as a woman. I thank you for everything you have taught me.

Special thanks to Dr. Ronald Schleifer for making himself available at all times for the vicissitudes of graduate paperwork, as well as for all his great support

in all matters scholarly throughout my years here and to Dr. Daniel Cottom who supported me in the early stages of my graduate work.

Finally, my mother deserves more credit than I could ever give her. She was my most enthusiastic supporter and my harshest critic. Without her support I could have never done anything. She recently departed, before she could see me through this time, but I know she will always be with me.

Table of Contents

# Introduction

In this work I examine the way female bodies are constructed by contemporary ethnic U.S. women writers in the clash of cultures, thus involving a process of negotiation between the dominant culture and ethnicity. Of special interest to my approach is how their construction of female bodies challenges the arbitrary limits, constraints and restrictions imposed by the Western androcentric view, and how social structures are embedded in the female body.

I also follow the way bodies and body images are produced and the role hierarchical differences, power relationships, and cultural expectations play in the process. I am interested in the way female bodies reflect the interconnectedness between standards of beauty and dis/empowerment, as well as the way guilt, shame and humiliation are produced by racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes. My broader concern is to investigate these issues within the context of the unstable opposition between the validation and normalization of cultural difference.

Taking the Foucauldian view that bodies are fabricated historically by multiple and competing discourses, I relate gender roles, domination, and the

ideal of the "feminine" to Bourdieu's critique of patriarchy disciplining bodies into subordinated femininity. Physical and symbolic violence against female bodies permeate to different degrees and are played out in different ways, with rape though inconspicuous, a constant in most of the literary texts under consideration. This should come as no surprise when we live in a culture in which the most violent video game, "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City" made by Rock Star Games, with women as victims, was the best seller of the year in 2002.

My concern was to follow the complexity of female embodiment in relationship to ethnicity, culture, class, politics, and the role self-positioning plays. I selected prominent writers rooted in distinct ethnic traditions to highlight how their heritage is either incorporated into the mainstream culture or contested by it. They are all educated in American universities, Erdrich and Morrison part of the system as very successful academics, their work part of popular culture, thus having a considerable impact on mainstream American culture. And, they all have to reconcile all this with a very different and sometimes conflicting ethnic heritage. My own position as an Eastern European woman vis-à-vis Western Europeans is

similar to that of ethnic women in the U.S. because it is rooted in the same type of ambivalence. Just as American ethnics find themselves both inside American culture and outsiders at the same time, Eastern Europeans share European culture and have the status of outsiders. As for American culture, I bring no built-in allegiances.

Because bodies are never just material bodies, since we perceive and interpret them according to our own values, biases and prejudices, and impose collective identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, and so on upon them, the first step involved was to underscore what goes into these labels for each author. Therefore, each part opens with a theoretical overview of the issues and concerns that historically have played a dominant part in the construction of gender, femininity, and female bodies for the particular culture and the specific author, followed by the way they translate into literary works through female characters that defy cultural stereotypes. Initially, I planned to follow the same issues, even have the same headings for all authors in order to work out a clear comparison of the ways in which the stereotypes are challenged. The project turned out very differently because of the very different concerns highlighted in the construction of identity and

categories such as gender, femininity, and consequently female bodies by each author. The lenses the authors employed are so different the issues highlighted can't fall under the same headings. Their agendas take precedence over any topic.

Part one, "Success is Masculine, Failure is Feminine" explores Louise Erdrich, a Native American writer with strong feminist affiliations. It is this particular precept of patriarchy that she dismantles, attacking it from a number of different angles in her work. Erdrich has an inclusive, fluid view of gender, race, and ethnicity. Categories traditionally constructed as opposites such as male and female or white and Native American become a matter of virtuality rather than unavoidable reality in her view and are seen as reversible. This is reflected by her construction of male/female characters. The first character I discuss is Father Damien/Agnes, interchangeably male and female, a matter of perception, that is, the construct of different values, biases, and stereotypes at work. After carefully examining her rules for gender construction I discuss three female characters that challenge the traditional understanding of femininity from different perspectives that defy stereotypes: Fleur, endowed with mythic powers,

June, the Christ/trickster figure, and Lulu, who pulverizes the very concept of the feminine from the inside by being blissfully unaware of any rules that construct it.

Part two, "The World in Black and White" examines Morrison's work. The first part sets the context illuminating the issues that dominate her perspective. She declares herself not a feminist. Unlike Erdrich, Morrison is all about racial visibility. Racial identity takes precedence over all other concerns and there is an unmistakable divide between the American and African American heritage. Yet it turns cut she is very much under the influence of mainstream American culture. Morrison comes very close to fitting Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry. Her strategies of resistance are hardly distinguishable from forms of collaboration. After considering the historical baggage she brings to the discussion when she addresses gender, femininity, and the construction of female bodies, I analyze how it plays out in the construction of her female characters. I look at the ways physical bodies in her work are connected to identity and empowerment. I choose three characters that run against the norm, challenging mainstream understanding of femininity. Sula, the victim turned

predator, who unites the community in their unequivocal condemnation of her, Jadine, the main character of Tar Baby, who achieves the status of white male only to be severely sanctioned by the community for it, and Sethe, the main character of Beloved, a character in which the body as site of political contestation is most obvious, dramatizing Susan Bordo's metaphor of the body as battleground.

Part three, "The Misrepresentation of History" deals with Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. When it comes to the construction of female bodies, the most relevant concern they confront is the historical heritage of consistent erasure Asian American women have been subjected to. Their position on gender and femininity is different from Erdrich or Morrison because, while ethnic discrimination is a reality, their primary concerns revolve around the ability of breaking the centuries-old inflicted silence and writing themselves into history. The last section of this chapter, "Writing History into Women" addresses in a unitary form one of my concerns I underline throughout this project, namely how mainstream American culture marks the female characters under consideration, characters that are created to challenge it. While the mainstream influence is minimal at times,

it is never absent and sometimes it is a lot more substantial than expected. It is the dynamics of these conflicting forces that generate the erosion of inherited gender distinctions.

All the examples discussed underscore the political struggle to empower difference in a world where "[t]he patient-citizen, governed by the norm of representation and by the hegemony of normalcy, passes in one lifetime through a series of institutions- day care, primary, secondary and higher educational facilities, corporate employment, managed care, hospitals, marriage and family, and finally nursing homes- all of which are based around the legal, juridical, medical, and cultural normalizing concepts" (116).

In a world where the body has "historically constituted both implicit and explicit contracts within our legal, political, and cultural systems" (Holloway, 41) I am interested in the grounds on which the historic heritage is contested, the effects of contesting the stereotypes and their subversive potential, the cultural issues highlighted in the process, and the different understandings of femininity which affect the construction of female bodies.

## Part I. Success is Masculine, Failure is Feminine

Louise Erdrich, a Chippewa of the Turtle Mountain Band, has written several novels that make up a cycle. The cycle can be considered a postmodern rendition of shifting perspectives and elusive truths, which it is, or as employing plain old gossip techniques in the best Indian tradition that combines myths and storytelling, which, again, it does.

Erdrich populates her fictional space with a series of remarkable female characters. Her women defy the traditional historical, social, and cultural constructs of power and gender roles. Traditionally, the way the decks are stacked, success is masculine while failure is feminine. Success, which in the Western worldview equals power-whether manifested as social status, decision-making positions, religious, economic or physical power-is for the most part confined to public spheres, which have visibility, social recognition, and are male territory.

Following the traditional construction of gender roles, women are supposed to be weak, frail, fragile, helpless, and therefore in need of male protection. Notwithstanding the fact that male protection may come in the form of domestic violence and gender discrimination,

women are *supposed, expected* to be failures, and when they attempt to be successful, they do so at their own peril, being accused of wanting to cross gender lines at the expense of their femininity. Their role as child bearers, in the territory of the domestic world, has no visibility or exposure and, therefore, is hardly suited for honor, glory, or other forms of public recognition. That is not to say that women (in literature or elsewhere) have not upset the balance of power and proven themselves worthy of success on male territory, but they have done so in an uphill battle, as exceptions not the norm, and in spite of the social rules not because of them.

Completely unaware of such distinctions, Erdrich's characters can move on the axis success-failure freely, without gender restrictions. Yet female characters are not firmly posted at the success end of Erdrich's axis. Fleur, one of her most powerful and intriguing characters, introduced in Tracks and revisited in the following novels, gets raped, and is cheated out of her home by Margaret and Nector. It doesn't mean that the male characters are stuck at the failure end either, although one could more likely make a case for the latter. But there seem to be hardly any taboo male

territories left as dominions of male power. Everything is fair game. Fleur can hunt, play poker better than any man, and is feared by the whole community because of her Pillager powers.

Erdrich's female characters are powerful women in control who are rarely, if ever, dependent on male assistance, not that there's much of it going around anyway. And they do not succeed by sacrificing their femininity, or motherly nurturing qualities, or by acting as women's rights activists. Some of them, like Lulu for example, a character that takes center stage in Love Medicine, are quite proficient at having children and raising them. They seem to live in a different world governed by different rules from mainstream contemporary U.S. culture. There is no system oppressing them. They have the freedom that traditionally only men have to attack any situation and move on any territory-which can only become a matter of individual challenge not gender challenge. Erdrich's female characters even include Catholic priests and Christ figures.

Erdrich's women display a wide range of power that doesn't for the most part grace male characters: power to channel forces (divine or natural); power to create; power to destroy; power taken lightly, not used properly

(June); power gone awry (Leopolda). But, they are not failures even when they are defeated or victimized, or fail, which again is rarely the case. Even when things get ugly, when the confrontation becomes unfair, when they are outnumbered, and it all comes down to raw physical power, as in the episode of Fleur's rape, it is the men that find themselves on the losing side. They are all destroyed, as if they had attacked something way out of their league that annihilated them.

Erdrich has an inclusive rather than an exclusive view of genders. The traditionally stable binary opposition success/failure is fluid and interchangeable, as is the opposition: male/female. Gender becomes a matter of degree and reversibility - with the cultural and religious components also a matter of perspective.

## I.1. Father Damien: Between the Sacred and the Virtual

There is an abundance of trickster figures in Erdrich's novels. June, Fleur, and Gerry Nanapush all explore the fluidity commonly associated with the trickster. The ability to transcend worlds, time, and place is just part of it. Erdrich's fascination with the trickster, I believe, comes from the "spirit of epistemological jouissance"[1] that accompanies the figure.

Throughout her novels, traditionally stable binary oppositions become fluid and interchangeable. These separate and contrasting constructs display uncertain boundaries; the "either/or" relationship between them is blurred, and they can flow into each other. Deconstructing the cultural constructs of race, ethnicity class, and religion, as well as gender, seems to be a main preoccupation, as is the fluidity of reality. The trickster is, not surprisingly, the dominant figure in her fiction.

Erdrich uses the trickster as the norm in creating Father Damien, a character that, in its turn, spells out the rules for gender construction in her novels. This shape-shifter of indeterminate sex and interchangeable gender, who floats across time and place and has the ability to create and re-create identity very much along the lines of Judith Butler's "performative theory,"[2] provides the basis for a wicked surprise Erdrich has in store for her readers in The Last Report of the Miracles of Little No Horse. The priest who had a cameo role in earlier novels is actually a nun named Agnes DeWitt. Father Damien is a character built on paradox, inversion, and subversions. Turning the most credible authority figure of the Catholic Church from her previous novels

into the ultimate fraud as a sexual transgressor can be read as her way of poking fun at the venerable institution of the Catholic church, which it is in part, but that would be a simplistic reading.[3]

The trickster, just like Erdrich herself in her novels, not only refuses to assume one shape but at the same time exposes a mythic appetite to experience different perspectives. Perhaps Erdrich's fascination with the trickster, its fluidity and changing shape, has a more personal basis. Caught between two worlds, she can be part of either at her choice. As a mixedblood, her ethnicity can easily oscillate between Native American and white mainstream. While she has well-established roots in the Turtle Mountain Band of the Chippewas, (her grandfather Patrick Gourneau was a tribal chairman), she was raised off the reservation in Wahpeton, North Dakota where her parents were schoolteachers for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Erdrich was later educated at Dartmouth College and Johns Hopkins University. She became captivated with her native heritage and interested in recovering as much as she could of her native roots, especially the language, traditions, and stories she did not grow up with. Although she takes pride in being Native American, she looks white so that race seems

unlikely to have been an issue in placing her within the fixity of one category, which is a lot more than most of her fellow Native Americans can hope for. Whether they experience racial discrimination or not, race sticks with them wherever they go.[4] When she now revisits her Ojibwe roots, she does so as an academic, celebrated novelist, part and parcel of Western culture. Raised Catholic, she later became interested in Ojibwe religious beliefs. I am not discussing here the politics of her choices, which would be an intriguing topic in itself. I just want to make the point that choices were available to her, that she experienced the ability to transgress fixed categories, and that she experienced first-hand the fluidity of her reality and the arbitrary nature of such cultural constructs.

While a novelist can experiment with different perspectives, can take on a multitude of personae, male and female, young and old, of different races, ethnicities and cultures, Erdrich seems to have a particular fascination with assuming different identities. Her novels, in which every chapter has a different narrator and point of view, are ample proof of the extent to which she enjoys ludic exploits.

Making Father Damien a woman exposes the arbitrary nature of the way oppositions like man/woman, moral/immoral, sacred/sacrilegious are culturally constructed. We deal with a relentlessly heterogeneous reality in her fiction. From Miss Agnes DeWitt to Sister Cecilia to Father Damien, Erdrich puts her hero/heroine through a number of perplexing transformations experimenting with constructions of identity and social perceptions of identity. This one character changes from a chaste novice/nun to a virtuoso/a pianist to a passionate woman of boundless sexual appetite who lives in sin. All that is before s/he becomes a Catholic priest. There are more roles packed in this character than a Judy Dench could wish for. Erdrich compares her approach to identity and creation to that of Shakespeare, the master of "[i]dentities disguised continually, in a combative dance of illusion and discovery" (LR, 199).

The way Father Damien evolves can be the textbook illustration of Judith Butler's argument that our gendered identities are the mere effect of our performances and not the other way around. "It came to her that both Sister Cecilia and then Agnes were as heavily manufactured of gesture and pose as was Father Damien. And within this, what sifting of identity was

she? What mote? What nothing?" (LR, 76). The character may have metaphysical dilemmas about the nature of identity, but the implications of having a Catholic priest of the inappropriate sex subject to close, uncomfortable scrutiny not only of the nature of the social constructions of the opposition man/woman, but, also, as a direct consequence and even more puzzling, categories like moral/immoral, and sacred/sacrilegious.

Father Damien continually changes shape, with excess as his only constant, just like the trickster. And just like the trickster, who often finds himself at the losing end of the tricks, he is out to convert the Indians to Catholicism, to the white way of life and values, and ends up converting himself to the Chippewa religion. S/he goes native, prays in Anishinaabe in his/her most intimate moments, "preferred the Ojibwe word for praying, anama'ay" "began to address the trinity as four and to include the spirit of each direction" (LR, 182), and makes his/her confession to Fleur. The most surprising revelation of all, of course, turns out to be her womanhood.

Among the key paradigms deconstructed by Erdrich's handling of this character are: white/Indian, Catholic/Midé, man/woman. There can be no question as to

the first terms being the privileged ones in the binaries, considering the demographics of her readership. Thus, when Father Damien turns native, adopts the Midé religion, and turns out to be a woman within the system of power and domination, he takes a step down from a privileged to a subordinate position of inferiority and marginality. It turns out that the latter opposition is problematic, because actually the nature of the change is very different from its perception and has the opposite direction from woman to man and, therefore, has very different hierarchic implications. The transgression of moving to a presumably higher status, that is, from woman to man, is not perceived as a rise in status at all, thus upsetting the patriarchal system of values. Nanapush tells him/her: "You've been tricking everybody! Still, that is what your spirits instructed you to do, so you must do it. Your spirits must be powerful to require such a *sacrifice* [my italics]" (LR, 232). So what are the politics of changing the last equation and lumping "woman" together with white and Catholic, and man with Indian and ethnic and a fall in status?

The opposition moral/immoral, closely connected in the context of the narrative with that of sacred/sacrilege, is played out in several

configurations. First, is the issue of Sister Leopolda's sainthood. Father Damien is neutralized by a paradox. On the one hand, not revealing that she committed murder, among many other lesser transgressions, would lead to her beatification in the Catholic Church. On the other hand, revealing it would be a violation of the sanctity of the confession. At the core of the situation is the gendered construction of the other moral and religious questions debated here. Father Damien's being a woman changes the nature of the moral and religious value attached to commonly-accepted and distinct practices, therefore, making clear that morality and religion are not only socially and culturally constructed but also clearly gendered issues and, thus, opening for debate the morality of hierarchical domination. Erdrich's position of defending a kind of fluidity to the point of reversibility in the construction of gender leaves the derivative plethora of consequences inconsequential.

To begin with, the opposition male/female itself is presented as not so clearly opposed after all since there are traceable shades in between.[5] Nanapush, who is uncertain as to the true nature of his friend, Father Damien, tries to clarify his confusion, voices his ponderings in terms that would make the opposition even

more ambiguous and the boundaries, if anything, more unclear: "So you're not a woman-acting man, you're a man-acting woman" (LR, 232). This is not much of an operating distinction at all if identity is performance/role-play. Thus, the way Nanapush figures it, and phrases it, too, the crux of the distinction is founded on acting or performance, behavior, that is, a social construction which can only be shaped by the dominant discourse and, is not permanent or immutable. Furthermore, the syntactic structure of Nanapush's remarks makes apparent a playful reversibility between the terms that only destabilizes distinctions even more.

Father Damien himself seems mystified at times as to his exact placement into a gender category: "No sooner had the evidence vanished [menstrual blood, one of the few and not convincingly decisive biological markers brought into the equation] than *she* [my italics] felt a pang, a loss, an eerie rocking between genders" (LR, 78). At this point, gender construction seems to allow not just reversibility but also the suspension of the category.

Similarly, in an episode dealing with the ongoing conflict between the Ojibwe and the Bwaan (Sioux), there is a debate about the gender identity of one of the

candidates for a race between the tribes. The person in question "was an ikwe-inini, a woman-man called a *winkte* by the Bwaanag" (LR, 153). The way in which he is characterized in this passage relies entirely on gesture and performance, entirely on social construction of negative female behavior seen from a male perspective. He is "a graceful, sly boy who sighed, poised with grave nuance, combed his hair, and peered into the tortoiseshell mirror that hung around his neck by a rawhide thong" (LR, 153). Yet, although by way of biology, since the character is specifically labeled "boy," the choice would seem clear the Bwaanag have a hard time deciding " [w]as the *winkte* a man or a woman for the purposes of this race?" (LR, 153), that is, to compete against an Ojibwe man. They know how fast he is and that it would be in their advantage to pick him. The argument in his favor is "that as the *winkte* would run with legs that grew down along either side of a penis as unmistakable as his opponent's, he was enough of a male to suit the terms" (LR, 154). The quantifier itself, *enough* of a male, points more to something like a scale with varying degrees of ascertaining malehood and not to an either-or, binary opposition. One thing is clear: the assumed symbol of malehood alone is not enough to grant

him the status. "Some of the Ojibwa, who judged his catlike stance too threatening, rejected him as a male runner on account of his female spirit" (LR, 153). Although the decision eventually goes in favor of his being *considered* a man, the mere fact that it even comes into debate makes it quite clear that biology alone is not the decisive factor, that there is room for ambivalence in between the main terms of the opposition. Also, the way in which the decision is reached, through the recognition of the community to which he belongs and which must validate his status as a man, highlights the nature of the processes involved in gender construction and also highlights Butler's claim that "the social construction of the natural presupposes the cancellation of the natural by the social."[6]

But the fact is that the confusion and uncertainty are not resolved by the official recognition, because the *winkte*, although validated as a male for the purpose of the race, has an unfair advantage nevertheless, precisely because of his gender status, because of being a *woman*, an advantage that almost jeopardizes the fair outcome of the race for the other contestant because: "his opponent, whose job it was as a *woman* [my italics] to study men and

whose immediacy of manhood gave him an uncanny understanding, read …[his] mind " (LR, 154).

Nor are the two main categories uncontaminated. As if to add to the confusion, the presumably defining features sometime intersect. For the rules that govern gender construction and the grounds for validating the masculine and the feminine, it's worth having a closer look at Agnes prior to her transgression, while she was in the eyes of the world still a woman, because there are scores of features that point in the opposite direction. "[H]er voice was husky and bossy" (LR, 13) when she shows up in Berndt's doorway starved and with no place to go, qualities clearly not accounted for by her miserable state, thus, not context generated. She is "a female who did not blush or looked away but held him with an honest and calm look" (LR, 13) clearly running against the norms of her gender.

Whereas some elements, like the way she "bound [her breasts] tight to her chest with strips of cloth" (LR, 13), might be accounted for by her previous experience as a nun, a situation in which she had ample practice in denying her femininity for reasons unconnected with gender *per se* but rather with the negative stereotypes of temptation religion traditionally endeavored to wipe out

in women, her stance of being in charge, instead of meek and humble as a nun should be, or at least, again, as her pitiful circumstances would require, looks very much like masculine behavior. Just as Father Damien later on would look "girlish" (LR, 63) at times, Agnes seems to be from the very beginning a very manly girl. "She had a square boy's chin and a sturdy, graceful neck. Her arms were brown, muscular" (LR, 19). Nor does Agnes follow the well-established social gender roles of sexual encounters. She is no prey, and she is not passive or subdued in any way. She initiates and fully participates in whatever is going on between her and Berndt. She imposes the terms in her own time. And Agnes is by no means unique among Erdrich's characters in being a woman who displays masculine traits; if anything, she is a mild case compared to Mary Kashpaw.

There are many features in Father Damien that point to his feminine nature, which can be easily dismissed on account of his actually being a woman. " Father Damien was not beautiful. Agnes wanted to touch back her hair and bite her lips" (LR, 300). When in love again, she is more coquettish than she ever appeared to be as a girl. It's almost as if gender transgression brings out her feminine side. While Agnes looked tough and muscular, the

priest has "long, narrow, tender white feet…vulnerable feet" (LR, 203). Father Damien's soft spot for feminine props and accessories, which didn't stand out much in Agnes, seems to increase with age. "Even in his [old] age he was charmed by pure harmless feminine vanity" (LR, 267). Sister Hildergarde sometimes considers him "either too fanciful or too tender of heart" (LR, 117). As Father Damien, Agnes "behaved by perfect instinct" (LR, 183), a typically feminine weapon.[7]

While Mary Kashpaw "came to wonder why she saw no whiskers and recorded no beard growth on his chin" while "[o]ther white men had them" (LR, 212), not even his bitter enemy, Sister Leopolda who in her rage turns on him, can deny Father Damien's masculine side: "You have the voice of a priest,... you are mannish, unwomanly" (LR, 274). And irony of all ironies, the most cherished and distinctive feature of masculinity is rendered totally irrelevant by his condition: "Apparent that you haven't a man's equipment, though that is useless anyway upon a priest" (LR, 274). This, considered in conjunction with the absolute demand for masculinity as constitutive of a priest, makes an interesting paradox, and quite revealing for the rules of the Catholic Church in regard to chastity.

But maybe more revealing for the way Erdrich constructs gender is the ambiguity, the split, dual nature of his gender identity, the male-female coexistence sometimes at odds. "Father Damien didn't want to pray. Nevertheless Agnes went down on her knees and spoke earnestly aloud" (LR, 66). And once again it is the feminine side that imposes its will.

Thus, at times Father Damien is both man and woman, a "combination of delicacy and shrewd toughness" (LR, 162). At times, he is even oscillating between the two as, when the Lazarres and the Morrisseys have a row in church, almost destroying it. "Father Damien...patrolled inside nervously, then outside...Agnes stopped, put her hands on her hips, rallied her wits and her strength. Was her priest to be driven from his own church? She rocked on her heels....She clenched and unclenched her fists, and at last threw her power into the voice and demeanor of Father Damien" (LR, 167). Damien grabs a whip from one of the mourners and begins wielding it around to chase everyone out of the church.

Erdrich displays the whole arsenal of masculine and feminine gestures that make up the gender prescribed mandatory response required by the scene. She displays them side-by-side, contrasted and analyzed as to their

specificity. They stay nicely within their categories for a while, but then mingle as Agnes starts clenching and unclenching her fists like a man, with the dénouement that the stereotypes don't work as advertised at all, for it is Father Damien who is hesitant and lacks determination and Agnes who cold-bloodedly takes control of the situation instead of the other way around. Thus, it is obvious that visual aids can be misleading. The figure of authority that restores order and the respect of the church is nevertheless unmistakably male. Domination by violence works. Father Damien's congregation gets the message loud and clear and adjusts accordingly. The whip's owner is full of admiration when he "crept back and begged Father Damien to return his whip" (LR, 167). But the explosion of violence that won him the day leaves Father Damien full of shame at his loss of temper. Again, we have gender generated ambivalence. Father Damien is man enough to take control of the situation in a forceful manner and make those involved yield to his will, but can't follow up with enjoying the satisfaction of his well deserved status of victor and is embarrassed by it.

More than anything else, then, gender construction seems to be a matter of perception, and as such it is

doubly constructed, that is, at both ends. And once again, Erdrich does not shy away from pointing us to exactly what she means in the making of her narrative. "Father Jude blinked. In that instance a strange thing happened. He saw, inhabiting the same cassock as the priest, an old woman. She was a sly, pleasant contradictory-looking female of stark intelligence. He shook his head, craned forward, but no, there was Father Damien again, tottering into the comfort of his room" (LR, 139). Now the mere possibility of such gender transgression should have been not only perplexing but also extremely troubling for Father Jude considering the sacrilegious implications from the perspective of the Church. Throughout the novel, Father Damien's countless musings on the issue, as well as his arguments with Father Gregory illuminate all the facets of the possible implications of his gender for his position within the Catholic Church. But once more it is the costume that makes the part. All Father Jude is confronted with here is the reality of Father Damien's gender fabrication, on the one hand, and the manufactured system of symbols, on the other. Yet the symbols, namely the priestly cassock in this case, have more power than he trusts the fallible reality of his human being with, and he dismisses the

incident.[8] Although it can be argued that the context is slightly different, slanted, because of the Catholic Church, the truth is that other specialized contexts will be equally slanted, only in different ways, as they have manufactured rules of constructing reality and determining the role and value symbols play in it that are just as arbitrarily fabricated. Once again, Foucault's reading of the Middle Ages with their use of visual props, that manufactured the message and got it across too, don't look very remote after all. In fact, they seem to be still working pretty well.

Father Jude goes through a very similar unsettling experience later in the novel: "As he watched Father Damien closely, that troubling sensation once more came upon him. It was a problem of perception. A distinct uncanny sense he could only name in one way. 'Father Damien, if you don't mind my asking, have you got a twin?' 'I do not.' 'Never mind.' Jude shook his head to clear his vision" (LR, 146).

But let's have a closer look at the main terms of the equation and what they're made of first. While working on the ways to accomplish the gender deception, Father Damien comes up with a set of rules of manhood he needs to closely observe.

*Some Rules to Assist in My Transformation*

1. *Make requests in the form of orders.*
2. *Give compliments in the form of concessions.*
3. *Ask questions in the form of statements.*
4. *Exercises to enhance the muscles of the neck?*
5. *Admire women's handiwork with copious amazement.*
6. *Stride, swing arms, stop abruptly, stroke chin.*
7. *Sharpen razor daily.*
8. *Advance no explanations.*
9. *Accept no explanations.*
10. *Hum an occasional resolute march.* (LR, 74)

Now, hilarious as they may seem at first glance, these not accidentally Ten Commandments of manhood can be reduced to one main idea: domination.[9] This version of the essence of malehood consists entirely of prescribed social behavior, which is to say, acting; in fact, most of them could easily pass for stage directions. The one constant that links them all is ascertaining at all times a privileged status, making sure all the external signs clearly point out who's in charge. No dissenting perspectives will be tolerated to interfere with authority and power. The royal spectacle of power doesn't look so preposterous after all,[10] and the earlier reference to Shakespeare is quite appropriate. Once again, but more forcefully here, gender is constructed as role play, as something that is acquired through careful practice. Because it is the masculine gender, it is all about making the right noises to enforce one's will to dominate. And it is not the context of fabricating a

fraud that influences the substance of gender as fabrication; it only makes it more obvious.

This view of masculinity is developed further in the novel. From the first steps of her transformation, Agnes notices a substantial change in the way people perceive her. Fabricated or not, the spectacle of domination works, and it is automatically transferred to all things masculine, even to an incipient and clumsy fraud like herself: "the driver treated her with much more respect as a priest than she'd ever known as a nun" (LR, 62).

Agnes quickly learns what it feels like not to be subordinated. In fact, for her, masculinity looks very much like the lifting of all restrictions and sanctions that held her back: "As Agnes, she'd always felt too inhibited to closely question men. Questions from women to men always raised questions of a different nature. As a man, she found that Father Damien was free to pursue all questions with frankness and ease" (LR, 62). Thus, apart from the visual aids, a more meaningful sign of malehood is losing one's inhibitions, acting on one's true inclinations, losing the position of the dominated, feeling free. That would make femininity a negative construct based entirely on interdictions and restrictions.

The relationship between Father Gregory and Father Damien adds a new dimension to the understanding of the masculine position this time within gender interaction. We get a clear view of the fact that, although gender construction may be a matter of perception, riddled with ambivalence and plagued by ambiguity, male domination is real. And it looks like the rule of thumb is that any traceable feminine feature equals a fall in status, very much like the one drop of African blood rule that used to operate in the South. Any transgression into female territory is severely sanctioned.

Although doubly disabled by his terminal illness and his precarious situation of throwing himself at his former lover's mercy, Father Gregory automatically plays out the social prescriptions for his gender, automatically assuming a position of domination towards a subordinated Agnes. She is amazed to notice his behavior.

"Father Wekkle subtly condescended to her. He was unaware of it, but in all worldly situations, where they stood side by side, he treated her as somehow less" (LR, 303). "It was never anything that others might note, but when they were together, he spoke first, took charge even when he felt most ill, took information from doctors regarding his disease and translated it for her into

terms, simpler, he thought she would understand" (LR, p.303). And it is not his assuming the expected public performance elicited by his gender role either. "And there was another thing: that tone in his voice when they were alone. An indulgent tone, frankly anticipating some lesser capacity in her - whether intellectual, moral, or spiritual, she could not say" (LR, 303). The situation is even more revealing considering that under the circumstances, right or wrong, they were equal in every way, both priests, although Father Gregory had renounced priesthood. Anyway you look at it, the only difference between the two seems to be gender. Therefore, it is very difficult to come up with any other motivation as grounds for domination. It is hard to conclude from Erdrich's narrative, even Father Damien wonders, whether he treated her in the same way during their first encounter. The situation was very different though because for the most part Father Gregory believed Father Damien to be a man and, thus, treated him accordingly, with the respect commended by his gender. And then things changed - they became lovers - and in the confusion and frustration that followed it is more difficult to figure out what had priority, probably the multiple shock of finding out she was a woman, the astounding implications of the fact that

she was a fraud not a priest, and the seriously disturbing realization that the right moral choice for her would be to follow the reality of her calling and not that of her gender.

It is quite significant for the making of the character that Father Damien/Agnes refused to accept the domestic role designated for her gender as wife and mother. There is a consistent opposition on her part to accept the institution of marriage and to assume a subordinated position in a social and religious arrangement. And it wasn't just that she felt comfortable with whom she became late in her life when she met Father Gregory either; even in her beginnings as Agnes she refused stubbornly to perform the role of wife to Berndt. Her explanation for refusing it is feeble and unconvincing, if not totally illogical. The fact that she was to become a nun and therefore was *almost* Christ's bride, that is, her strong religious convictions and values can hardly account for her choice of living in sin rather than accepting the socially and religiously prescribed ritual. And it needs to be noted that she lives with Berndt according to her own rules and her own will, that she is the one in charge of the relationship and she decides where to go with it. She refuses the

passive stereotype to the extent also of earning her own money.

On the other hand, it is more likely that during the many years as Father Damien/Agnes got used to the proper respect due to a man and moreover a man of the cloth and therefore Father Gregory's behavior towards him immediately struck a discordant note. It is possible that she forgot what it was like to be treated like a woman. The sudden realization makes him wonder whether he got so accustomed to his status, whether by slipping into his male character he unwittingly acquired all the prescribed gender role attributes: "Did she patronize women too, now that she'd made herself so thoroughly into a priest?" (LR, 303).

It is the change of status that provides Father Damien with the necessary distance to realize domination when it stares *her* into the face. Other women are not just used to it, taking it for granted as they know that it comes with the territory, but they construct it as a sign of manhood, something to be desired in a real man. They need a man to be their superior in order to place any value on him as a man. Pauline's mother expresses this idea in no uncertain terms: "She would not stoop to marry a man who could not beat her. She vowed she would

marry the one who could" (LR, 151). She actually means beating her at running as "she had, in fact, challenged the young men who came to court her to footraces" (LR, 151). The issue of male dominance is nevertheless real. And, although gender is culturally constructed, it cannot be inferred that Ojibwe culture is particularly misogynistic either.[11] As a matter of fact, in Native cultures, according to Paula Gunn Allen, women used to have a more prominent position before white contact. Nor has this particular construction of manhood disappeared with time. In fact, in the same novel, Father Jude has a similar moment of illumination when he falls for Lulu, a moment determined by his very limited interaction with women on a social (not religious) basis: "He realized that he'd never let any woman drive him anywhere before" (LR, 335).

Male dominance and superiority come at a price, though, as sometimes circumstances demand proof. Pauline's mother knew that "[i]n pride before his compatriots, her man would have to offer up his life for her own" (LR, 152) and takes full advantage of this piece of knowledge.

For Erdrich, male dominance and superiority are very real, whereas gender construction, upon which they are

based, seems a lot more of a virtuality than a reality. Nevertheless, there is so much riding on the carefully staged enactment of that virtuality, as well as on its social perception. Gender, be it fluid or even reversible, is still a determining factor. Father Damien is suspended between the sacred, some might argue a virtuality in itself since never fully achieved by most humans, and the virtuality of gender.

### I.2. Fleur, the mythic woman

Fleur, one of the main characters of Tracks (1988) and revisited in the following novels of the North Dakota cycle, is one of the last survivors of the Pillagers; the rest were wiped out by disease and poverty. As the last descendant of Old Man Pillager, she inherited exceptional powers that make her both respected and feared by the whole community.[12]

The narrative continually underscores her wild, animal nature. Fleur belongs to the bear clan. She has the power and fearless defiance in the face of danger of a bear. The bear spirit lives inside her. Her smile, the feared Pillager smile that can harm people is repeatedly described as a wolf grin.

> Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth. It comes down through the hands, which in the Pillagers are strong and knotted, big, spidery and rough, with sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards. It comes through the eyes too, belligerent, darkest brown, the eyes of those in the bear clan, impolite as they gaze directly at a person. (T, 31)

Fleur is a force of nature overflowing with primal energy. Her raw animal power is made prominent from the moment she is introduced in the novel as "wild as a filthy wolf" (T, 3). Contrary to the norms of social acceptability for young women within the Chippewa community, she lives alone in her isolated cabin in the woods, "dresse[s] like a man" (T, 12), and couldn't care less that "[a] young girl had never done such a thing before" (T, 8.) And again unlike other women, she is not dependant on men. She can fish and hunt for her dinner as well as any man, and she can play cards better[13], although women don't usually play with men. She gets hired at Kozka's Meats for her strength. "She could lift a haunch or carry a pole of sausages without stumbling" (T, 16). Living by her own rules, she has complete disregard for social conventions, gender related or otherwise, if for no other reason than that she has other things to worry

about like survival or attempting to save her family's land from being officially stolen from her.

Her powers as medicine woman include secrets that can cure or kill. But what makes her really stand out among her own people is the fact that she drowned three times and came back to life.[14] For the Chippewa drowning is the worst thing that can happen to anyone. According to their beliefs, the drowned are caught up between worlds forever wandering and unaccepted in the spirit world. Yet she comes back from the dead to life over and over again.

The Pillager land near Matchimanito Lake is home to Misshepeshu, the water monster, which is said to have appeared when the Pillagers moved there from Leech Lake, Minnesota. It is rumored that she has an affair with Misshepeshu, the water monster, and there is suspicion that the monster may have even fathered her child, Lulu, especially since the child has green eyes like the monster.

Although Fleur is good looking and extremely sensual, men stay clear of her because they are afraid of the water monster who is attracted to "young girls, the strong and daring" (T, 11) and think he'd be jealous. She is a woman of power, dominating everything that comes her

way. That does not mean that everything is going her way; bad things happen to her but she has the ability to deal with them; she has a Gargantuan answer to all of them, which makes her a legend. Even when the odds are against her, as when three men overpower and rape her, acting out their frustration of being wiped out at poker by her, it is the men that are in it over their heads and who will bring upon themselves their own destruction as a direct result of their action[15]. She can be hurt, but she is not defeated, not by a long shot as it turns out that she is still running the game, and because of the things that happened "she almost destroyed the town" (T, 12).

Exceptional in every way, Fleur can walk without leaving tracks. Even in a relationship that is traditionally male dominated, or at least in which men are credited to be originators, as in her tumultuous love affair with Eli Kashpaw, Eli only unwittingly believes that he is doing the chasing while it is obvious for the initiated that he was "snared" by Fleur's powers[16].

In spite of her raw animal nature and her ability to trample on traditionally male territory with impunity, her femininity-femininity in the Western construction of the term, meaning being attractive to men, seductive, nurturing-is never in jeopardy. Although she appears to

be built like a man -"[h]er cheeks were wide and flat, her hands large, chapped, muscular...[her] shoulders were broad and curved as a yoke, her hips...narrow (T, 18)- her feminine attraction is hard to miss, especially by men, but not exclusively, as much of her troubles spring from Pauline's twisted jealousy at not having her affection for Fleur returned and at the same time her affection for Fleur's husband Eli.

The way Erdrich constructs Fleur's character, making it deliberately difficult to pin down, combining realistic detail and a lot of innuendo and appeal to the imagination, is consistent when it comes to her appearance and the way she is dressed. Fleur's clothes, although first and foremost a sign of the poverty of the area, are just hinted at, the details are sketchy; her appearance is just as elusive as her character. Throughout the first part of the novel she wears a green dress which Erdrich doesn't describe in much detail, but which is clearly symbolic of her connection with the lake and the seaweed on its bottom, some of which Eli at some point finds on her neck although Fleur cannot swim. Erdrich carefully orchestrates this correlation throughout the novel and systematically sustains the suspicions. While working hard at boiling heads at

Kozka's Meats in the unbearable August heat, "[h]er green dress, drenched, wrapped her like a transparent sheet. A skin of lakeweed"(T, 22.) The third time that she drowns toward the end of the novel, "The wet clothing shrouded [her]... like a sheet of weeds but she wasn't cold"(T, 213).

The words Erdrich uses to describe Fleur are just as powerful as what Erdrich leaves unsaid to be played out in the imagination. "An old green dress clung to her waist, worn thin where she sat" (T, 18). There is tension building between the way the dress attempts to contain Fleur's body and the way her body fights back, refusing enclosure. The "green rag of a dress...was too small, split down the back and strained across the front"(T, 34), a tangible expression of not being fit to contain her body. Her mythic dimension that escapes full understanding and cannot be regulated by social structures or norms is paralleled by her body refusing to be neatly enclosed and restrained as female bodies should, just as throughout the novel she refuses the passive stereotype, as opposed to the active male stereotype, in the androcentric worldview.

At the narrative level she is equally elusive since although Erdrich switches the point of view quite

frequently, Fleur is never the narrator. As critic Gloria Bird remarks, "Fleur's consciousness is the only one that remains inaccessible to the readers. Our knowledge of her is shaped solely through second hand" (T, 45)[17].

It becomes apparent throughout the novel that her body is not a big or prominent part of who she is, although in being a woman, it should define her. Glenn Harrington's cover[18] of the book seems to reinforce Fleur's portrayal in the novel. Her body is a very small part of her, just hinted at on the margin of the cover. Her appearance is hazy, obscured rather than revealed by the halo of light that surrounds her and whose source is uncertain; that is, we don't really know whether it is shining on her or is generated by her. The bulk of the cover is covered by intriguing shapes reminiscent of the works Norval Morrisseau, the Canadian Ojibwe, founder of the Woodland school, a style also known as Legend or Medicine painting.

We never get inside Fleur to know what or how she thinks, so most of what we know of her comes from the way she affects other people and how others perceive her. There is a tremendous aura of mystery surrounding her, but it is not the mystery of the "eternal feminine" but, instead, the powerful and terrifying mystery of her magic

powers. It is her actions and the fear she inspires in others that characterize her. There is no passivity, let alone submissiveness in Fleur. She is never dominated, not even when crushed; she is still the dominant force. Maybe, a classic example would be the way she handles the situation when the lumber company takes over the land of her family, which in the relationship American Indians have with their land, would amount to the annihilation of her identity. After fighting the odds any way she could, by exhausting hard labor and stubbornness, when it is obvious that because of successive deceitful acts and betrayals on the part of the tribal leaders and those she considers her family, Margaret and Nector, all is lost, and it all boils down to sheer physical power as she is facing forced eviction from her own land, she clearly shows everybody that she can rise to the challenge and she puts up a show of mythic dimensions, making the world crumble on the intruders:

> Each tree was sawed through at the base.
>
> One man laughed and leaned against a box elder. Down it fell, crushed a wagon... With one thunderstroke the trees surrounding Fleur's cabin cracked off and fell away from us in a circle, pinning beneath their branches the roaring men, the horses. The limbs

> snapped steel saws and rammed through wagon boxes. Twigs formed webs of wood, canopies laced over groans and struggles.... The men and animals were quiet with shock. Fearing a second blow they lay mute in the huge embrace of the oaks. (T, 223-4)

Thus, when she leaves, she leaves in style with the victors, the many men that threatened to overpower her, subdued and quieted, too frightened to comprehend the twisted irony of their humiliation. Fleur is never a passive victim.

The androcentric stereotype of what a woman is all about is completely lost on her. As part of Erdrich's novel, she belongs equally to the American Indian heritage, namely Chippewa and the Western world view. Erdrich is a mixedblood raised at the best in both traditions, although both her formal education and her actual existence inside mainstream American culture must have taken a toll on.

At the same time, Erdrich gives such a powerful and dominating character a French name meaning "flower," thus clearly putting the character on the side of appearance, charm and inviting associations such as beauty, sensuality, vulnerability, purity, a very girlie, "feminine" name if there ever was one. French names,

which suggest sophistication and elegance, are commonly used for girls in Erdrich's works,[19] as in American culture in general, but not for men.[20]

The delicate flower can be lethal and the males of the community recognize it as such. And the danger she might pose when provoked is not the feminine danger of the oppressed coming from the hidden, subversive weapons of the weak. Quite the opposite, it is the raw, defiant challenge of a very masculine kind of physical threat and aggressiveness. There is a clear instance in Tracks where this cannot be missed since it is presented in conjunction with a typical female response. Boy Lazarre and Clarence Morrissey shave Margaret Rushes Bears's braids in revenge for what they consider their sister Sophie's humiliation at the hands of Eli, Margaret's son. Overwhelmed with shame and humiliation, Margaret expects to be revenged by the men of her family, and is annoyed by what she perceives as their lack of determination to act and only too grateful to cover her shaved head with the costly bonnet Nector buys for her. She expects the men of her family to protect and defend her honor. Her personal response to the situation is passive and her only reactions are anger, helplessness, and an attempt to hide her shame.

As for Fleur, she acts. Fleur shares the humiliation as she considers Margaret her mother-in-law, and when she is told what happened, "[s]he cut her braids off, shaved her own head clean, and put her hair in a quilled skin pouch"(T, 117). Because shame, like honor its flip side, is social in nature and is for the most part[21] experienced in public as it needs social validation, Fleur then takes a very aggressive approach and flaunts her bald, head going to town with her head uncovered to display publicly how she made it her business to settle scores. She looks like a specter of destruction pulverizing everything in her path. "Her thick skirts brushed the snow into clouds behind her. Though it was cold [winter in North Dakota] she left her head bare so everyone could see the frigid sun glare off her skull" (T, 119). The mere sight of her makes the two offenders run away in terror, not that there is any escape possible. Fleur's implacable resolution has hypnotic effects; they don't even attempt to put up a fight; they know they're doomed. "[Lazarre] did not defend himself but his useless tongue clattered when she approached" (T, 120).

Although Fleur kills him by use of bad medicine, which would be considered together with magic the weapons

of the weak, who dare not and cannot fight a fair fight out in the open, thus, making it a typically feminine response, her response is anything but feminine just as there is nothing hidden about it. Fleur takes action; she takes the male confrontational approach of settling scores by might alone. She completely dominates her opponents throughout the episode. She overpowers her enemies by striking at them in the open, in plain view of the community, by what can be read as an incursion into enemy territory to take revenge, punish the perpetrators, and restore Margaret's honor,[22] very much in the same way a military action would. She is a one-woman army. Although she stops short of physically killing them on the spot, it is just barely and debatably so, since Boy dies of blood poisoning after she bites him.[23] She has complete power over them; she just chooses a more satisfying way to inflict her justice.

If one takes the Western andrccentric worldview, Fleur indeed is excluded from the positions of authority, as women traditionally are. At Kozka's Meats, she is a hired hand, and as such, the balance of power definitely will go against her. She is not on the tribal council, instead she finds herself on the opposite side, fighting it unsuccessfully for her land. With the lumber company

she is fighting power again. Thus, she would be quite a fitting case of subordinated femininity, although in her case never subdued, because she never finds herself in a position of power. But this is the Western concept of economic and political power, which is different from the Native American concept of power, and it can be argued that Native American people irrespective of gender had it in very limited supplies after the white occupation.

"The concept of power among tribal people is related to their understanding of the relationships that occur between the human and non-human worlds...power that enables magical things to happen"[24](Gunn Allen, 22). In the Chippewa worldview that centers on sacred, non-political power, Fleur has quite a different position. She is dominating through her magic powers which she seems to possess from birth, and by her individual accomplishments. That's why she blames herself, or could it be takes responsibility, for everything that goes wrong with her life including the death of her prematurely born child. "In her mind she was huge, she was endless. There was no room for the failures of anyone else. At the same time, she was the funnel of our history. As the lone survivor of the Pillagers, she staggered now beneath a burden of a life she was failing

to deserve" (T, 178). If one collates the exceptional position she holds among her own people, and the respect and honor she commands, with all her earthly possessions she carries inside the box of the cart when she is forced to leave the land of her ancestors: "weed-wrapped stones from the lake-bottom, bundles of roots, a coil of rags, and the umbrella that had shaded her baby [,] [t]he grave markers,... four crosshatched bears and a marten" (T, 224) the stark contrast between the two makes it quite obvious that economic or political power has nothing to do with her powers. The bears and the marten are her "coat of arms," the tangible emblem of her identity, and quite fittingly with her present situation, marking graves.

The fascinating part of Fleur's character seems to come from the fact that she is constructed out of two opposing worldviews just as she is constructed between the male and female stereotypes, an exploration characteristic of Erdrich's narrative that can also spring from what Paula Gunn Allen argues to be historically a radically different construction of gender and gender relations in Native American cultures from Western culture.

Only that, although judging by the way Fleur's character appears in Erdrich's narrative might give the

wrong impression, the Western stereotype of femininity is not only alive and well but also held in the highest possible regard. It appears in the figure of the Blessed Virgin and although that chapter is narrated by Pauline, a Native who tries to deny her ethnicity as she wants to be white, and who is also a religious zealot, it has an equal value within the logic of the text which alternates narrators, all differently biased. And there's no denying it, the stereotype is all there. The Holy Virgin "was *perfect* [my italics]…The Virgin's foot was small, *white* [my italics] …She had a full figure curving to a slim waist, broad hips…[h]er throat was…milky white" (T, 92). Thus, the standard of feminine beauty and perfection are set in no uncertain terms: white, generous curves, slim waist. She is dressed in a sequined satin robe and pleated veil.

### I.3. June - the trickster[25] Christ figure

Unlike Fleur, the mythic woman, who is all Ojibwa in her actions, with the notable exception of the episode in The Last Report, where for a short while, out of the blue, Erdrich decides to make her a sparkling socialite who comes out of the woods and is versatile enough that, with no previous knowledge or any experience of the

American high society, just like that[26], she can turn into a fashion icon, the belle of high society, only to get back at the man who stole the land of her family and take her revenge, June from the very beginning is torn between the white and Indian worlds. The in-betweenness is obviously quite relevant, but defining for this character is the word 'torn' as it seems that the whole logic of its construction revolves around it.

There are many instances that point to the clash of the different worldviews, not least of which is the concept of time. June is caught between the Western, linear time, the time she wants to kill in the beginning of Love Medicine when she is first introduced, and which, as it will turn out, actually killed her, (Owens, 195) and the cyclic Native American time of the seasons, starting with spring, where the action begins, and which is quite relevant for the symbolism of the events Erdrich presents. Spring is a time of regeneration after death in the order of things, and as if to make the associations quite clear, June at some point in the narrative is ejected like an egg from the warm containment of a car out into the cold, with her pants pulled halfway up: "It was a shock like being born" (LM, p.6).

Furthermore, she is constructed between two conflicting (or maybe not quite so conflicting as they may seem at first sight) figures: the Ojibwa trickster and Jesus Christ.

The association with the traditional trickster is made obvious from the beginning of the novel when June is introduced walking down the road, the way trickster narratives begin. The trickster is not just a gender bender, it can take any shape and mock death, or anything else for that matter, just as we'll see June[27] in Bingo Palace move between worlds as she pleases, something Fleur was suspected of too. The trickster can overturn all conventions and embody all possibilities in an eternal act of imaginative liberation that refuses closure, and June will extensively provide such instances.

More interestingly, though, for Erdrich, June is also a female Christ figure, obviously a very untraditional, unfeminine view. Female personages when associated with the sacred usually resemble fertility deities like mother earth, and displaying nurturing, protective qualities[28]. June cannot make many nurturing or motherly claims, quite the opposite, as a matter of fact, there are rumors that she is a child abuser and had tried

to drown her own baby, Lipsha, which considering the significance of drowning for the Chippewas is doubly a capital crime.

In the Catholic religion there is the strong Holy Virgin cult, which the sacred associated with the feminine, emulates. The idea of suffering and sacrifice is still there, but there is also a softness and passivity, in the sense that Mary is not a major player with power of decision, or power to influence events (only indirectly, by appealing to her Son), and this came to define the feminine. Erdrich instead goes for the kill, choosing Jesus, the main figure of Christianity, a very unfeminine choice, characterized first of all by being top of the pyramid, as all Christians define themselves in relation to Him, and then by action and results. He is the one that makes things happen for everyone. He is the one in control.[29]

And maybe surprisingly, taking the Native American trickster perspective, Christ can be read as a trickster, too. Considering that he performed miracles, that sometimes he found himself at the losing end of his tricks, and that he moved between worlds, Christ comes very close to the trickster.[30]

In the period Erdrich depicts in Love Medicine, the 1930s-1980s, as opposed to Tracks, the Native American perspective and the Native American beliefs are no longer dominant, definitely not the norm. This time not being *Catholic* is considered unacceptable. When her mother asks Albertine about having met any marriageable boys in Fargo she knows " by marriageable...she meant Catholic"(LM, 14).

Another very interesting aspect revealed by Love Medicine, which introduces a younger generation of Chippewas, is the new way in which they view themselves in relation to white people. In *Tracks* although presenting the hardest hit generation of Chippewas, the fullbloods have a very strong sense of ethnic identity and look down on mixed-bloods, for instance. In Love Medicine, in spite of everything Chippewas believe in and stand for, the values of the dominant discourse seem paradoxically to have rubbed off in a way. and very much shape the Chippewa way of thinking, and we clearly see the Virgin Mary as the ideal of feminine perfection with particular insistence on her whiteness. With the new generation things are very different. They seem to have distanced themselves from the mentality of the oppressed who identify the values of the oppressors as the higher

standard to be strived for, and who tend to internalize the oppression by assuming an alien way of thinking, by adopting alien standards according to which they acknowledge the higher status and subject themselves to being subaltern, inferior[31]. This new generation seems to feel comfortable enough in their skins to regard white as ugly, repulsive: "She's ugly. White as a fish!" (LM, 72), June bitterly comments on Marie, Nector Kashpaw's love interest. Although driven by jealousy when she utters the words, June's heavy racial implications are unmistakable.

Similarly, when Zelda calls Lynette "[t]hat white girl," (LM, 24) it is clearly perceived as derogatory and considered *politically incorrect*, especially since her own daughter present at the discussion has a white father. When reminded of the detail Zelda explodes: "My girl's *Indian*,...I raised her an Indian and that's what she is" (LM, 24). The tables are completely turned in the system of values.

The change is hard to miss in June's reaction, by her not knowing how to act subordinate. She doesn't even seem to know the rules of being oppressed, of finding oneself at the wrong end of power. "June didn't know the rules, though, of being a student, and for that matter she didn't act much like she knew she was Indian, either.

She approached Johnson as though they were two regular people" (LM, 268). The instinctive defiance of the character, as a trickster figure unwilling to be confined by conventions, may account for some part of it, but the clear fact that she acts with no regard for racial and social restrictions remains. June never acts inferior. She never "knows her place." Approaching Johnson "*as though they were* [my italics] regular people" erases gender, as well as racial and social distinctions. She will not acknowledge his superiority as a man, white, or authority figure.

There is a strange, ambivalent mixture apparent here. On the one hand the new generation of Chippewas reject the white alien worldview, on the other hand, unlike the older ones, they seem to have completely adopted at least part of the new system of values, at least the religious part. Most likely, as Indians did with foreign elements coming their way whether customs, beliefs, or materials, they incorporated them into their system, making them their own, thus, the paradoxical synthesis.

Taking the Christian perspective, Erdrich develops a consistently orchestrated line of associations building on the ideas of sacrifice, crucifixion, death and

resurrection around June. The time of the narrative is the day before Easter. The title of the chapter is "The World's Greatest Fisherman." Just like Christ, she walks on water. Shortly after we see her walking down the street she dies by choice: "The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home" (LM, 7).

Erdrich goes to great length to make it quite clear that in no way could have June died by accident: "But June grew up on the plains. Even drunk she'd have known a storm was coming. She'd have known the heaviness in the air, the smell in the clouds. She'd have gotten that animal sinking in her bones"(LM, 10). When Zelda tries to insinuate that the man she was with might have had something to do with the way she died, her sister Aurelia's response is outrage, as she forcefully believes that it could only have been June's deliberate decision.

The idea of sacrifice, of willing death, is revisited in the novel. There is an earlier scene presented in flashback, where June almost dies, barely rescued by the determined intervention of Marie. This time she was to be hanged for the benefit of others, even if the benefit comes in the form of amusement. She is again a willing participant, following the rules of the

game, a child's game with rules devised by themselves. When caught, June puts forth a very convincing case, arguing why the rules were right and should not have been broken, that is, she should not have been saved, and Marie should not have interfered.

June is one of the most powerful characters Erdrich has created. Even after her death the other characters in the novel are under her influence and sooner or later they come to define themselves in relation to her, another obvious similarity to Jesus Christ.

In a typical Erdrichesque twist, June's sacrifice benefits others, just like Christ's, only this time her relatives literally cash in, as the benefit comes in the form of a car her son King buys with the insurance money.

Erdrich adds a new dimension with June. Suffering is a dimension imposed on the Indians as a white import and paramount for the religious construction of Jesus Christ,. Not that Indians didn't know suffering before the white contact, or that other characters in Erdrich's novels didn't suffer, because if anything they had more than their fair share, but this time, the way June is built, suffering becomes a part of her identity. It is a defining feature just as it is for Jesus Christ.

Suffering for June often comes in the form of abuse, just as it did for Christ.

From the first pages of the novel, the insinuation of abuse, seemingly circumstantial and arbitrary at first, is suggested, and then further developed. Albertine reads the letter informing her of June's untimely death over her textbook opened at "Patient Abuse." The insidious implication is elaborated on afterwards. The abuse comes on many levels for June. It takes a social form. June is a woman in a male dominated world, and to make things even worse, she is also an Indian woman in a white-dominated world. She has her worth and options pinned on her: "An Indian woman's nothing but an easy night" (LM, 9). With her defiance flying in the face of reality, June ignores all the rules in a very brave attempt to impose her own rules, supporting her forever utterly naïve belief that the next man, "could be different" (LM, 3), that she might stand a chance after all, which leads to a pitiful history of wretched relationships. And it is this stubborn belief that she can change the world that brings about her death, too.

Even inside the Indian world, within her own family, she is subject to domestic abuse, something quite rare

judging from Erdrich's books, or the place of women in Native American societies[32] which seem a lot more women friendly than the Western world. Nevertheless, her alcoholic husband, Gordie, is haunted after her death by unsavory memories: "His hands remembered things he forced his mind away from - how they flew out from his sides in rage so sudden that he could not control the force and the speed of their striking. He'd been a boxer in the Golden Gloves. But what his hands remembered now were the times they struck June" (LM, 212).

But there seems to an intrinsic potential for suffering even above and beyond all the possible explanations based on the unmistakable forms of abuse she was subjected to. Even as a small child, already traumatized, she had "sorrowful black eyes " and Marie, her adoptive mother is struck by the " sadness [she] couldn't touch" [in June.] "It was a hurt place, it was deep, it was with her all the time like a broke rib that stabbed when she breathed" (LM, 91).

June was a strange child. Nobody could figure out how she survived alone in the woods after her mother's death, the rumor was that the spirits raised her. The Crees who found her put some beads around her neck to protect themselves from the spirits. "The woods were in

June," just like in Eli,[33] and maybe more. She had sucked on pine sap and grazed grass and nipped buds like a deer" (LM, 87). Marie, who raises June, is struck by the child's unlimited powers of endurance, which she sees as the only resemblance to her mother. "It was as if she really was the child of what the old people called Manitous, invisible ones who live in the woods" (LM, 87).

Erdrich insists on June's deliberate construction of femininity in a way she does not with Fleur, whose physical appearance didn't seem to factor in too much, and although we know she is very attractive, Erdrich gives very few details and in very general terms to make the point that looks and clothes are not a defining part of her.

At the time the novel begins June is "a long-legged Chippewa woman, aged hard in every way except how she moved...easy as a young girl on slim hard, legs" (LM, 1). But "she had been pretty. "'Miss Indian America,' grandpa called her" (LM, 9). "Her hair was rolled carefully, sprayed for the bus trip, and her eyes were deeply watchful in their sea-blue flumes of shadow" (LM, 3). She has no contempt for any items from the arsenal for constructing femininity. Her bedroom contains perfume bottles. Her niece Albertine thinking of her provides an

image all made of feminine stereotypes: "She would be dancing if there was a dance hall in space. She would be dancing a two-step for wandering souls. Her long legs lifting and falling. Her laugh an ace. Her sweet perfume the way all grown-up women were supposed to smell. Her amusement at both the bad and the good. Her defeat. Her reckless victory. Her sons" (LM, 37). Erdrich is making it doubly sure that her female Christ figure is *all female*, with all the bells and whistles in the arsenal of feminine construction well represented: make-up, perfume, nails, hair-do, clothes, all the conventional deceitful and alluring tricks of femininity.

But at the time the novel begins (earlier scenes are flashbacks,) she is already broken, and her feminine props amply reflect it. "As time went by she broke, little by little, into someone whose shoulders sagged when she thought no one was looking, a woman with long ragged nails and her hair always growing from its beauty-parlor cut. Her clothes were full of safety pins and hidden tears" (LM, 9). Still clinging on tight to her feminine coquetry, trying to hide her shortcomings and still hang on to her self-image, "she had stayed pretty even when things got...bad" (LM, 9).

She is broken well before she dies. "She felt so fragile" (LM, 4). June is nothing if not feminine. Her whole appearance, her symbolic name, the way in which all men were in love with her, everything points to her as an archetype of femininity. Only this archetype of femininity is torn and victimized. Her clothes, her high-heels, like all women's clothes meant to restrict, obstruct and hinder rather than *clothe*, protect and facilitate movement[34] and external manifestation in general, reflect her miserable state, not just of poverty, but that of being completely incapacitated. "Her clothing itched. The pink shell was sweaty and hitched up too far under her arms but she couldn't take off the jacket, the white vinyl her son King had given her, because the pink top was ripped across the stomach" (LM, 4).

The intriguing question regards the politics of Erdrich in creating a female Christ-figure-not just a typical or rather stereotypical female figure: young, innocent, chaste, but rather quite a controversial one, as June is a complex character. At the beginning of *Love Medicine* it is unclear whether "she was more drunk or more sober" (LM, 6). If she is not technically a prostitute she comes dangerously close to it, as there is

a clear reference to "the money...the man before this one had given her" (LM, 2), and she is picked up from the street by a man sitting in bar she happens to pass by, who waves at her. She gets drunk and almost, but for his passing out, has sex with him. Clearly her moral values, at least from a Christian perspective, are deplorable.

Thus Erdrich picks a drunk, Indian woman with loose morals and makes her into a Christ figure. It may be Erdrich's way of leveling the field. Is may be another one of her transgressions and quirks. It may be her intention to make fun of the Catholic dogma, to rewrite the figure of Christ in a feminist manner, or maybe just to give us a more accurate, undiscriminating yet still thoroughly religious reading of Christ. Her writing philosophy and techniques teach us not to expect a clear choice instead of open, even conflicting readings.

### I.4 Lulu - The Broken Mirror

Lulu Lamartine, Fleur's daughter, is another controversial construction of femininity. The controversy emerges this time from two competing discourses highlighting conflicting worldviews that shape Erdrich's characters' perception and decoding of reality. In the process the arbitrary nature of the construction of

gender, and the feminine, what stereotypes and biases go into them, and how they operate come again under intense scrutiny.

Picking up on the Lacanian specular image, Luce Irigaray[35] argues that it only reflects what the seer wants to see, a claim central to her work. After Foucault and Bourdieu it is hard to believe that individual agency can be decisive, because what the seer *wants* is pretty much predetermined socially, culturally and historically. Nevertheless, Lulu provides an interesting case of broken mirror that seems to reflect randomly pieces of two conflicting discourses, thus placing her in the difficult position of not belonging to, or being shaped entirely by either.

Definitely Erdrich places Lulu within a phallocentric culture that prescribes the rules for what women, femininity, and female desires should be, and expects her to "mirror" this image. She not only resists but completely ignores (it really seems that she isn't even aware of what a woman's place should be within the power relations of a misogynistic society) every attempt at normalization, while on the other hand she completely buys into other aspects of the same dominant discourse, like the ideal of feminine beauty. And she seems to be

alone within her social group under such conflicting and arbitrarily selective influences.

Lulu is like a cat: independent, difficult if not entirely impossible to control and dominate, that much everybody agrees on. The different reasons why they do so make evident the different values that rule the two competing discourses.

Her fellow tribesmen consider her a slut, and her running around is severely sanctioned by a society that holds women to clear standards of morality originating in the frozen image of domestic bliss-patriarchal standards, of course, since the main value of a woman is still established in relation to a man. Exclusivity is valued. Since the masculine order constructs the love relationship as a form of masculine appropriation, "selective refusal which adds the price of exclusivity," (Bourdieu, 30) honoring the male counterpart is expected, as female "reputation and especially their chastity [are] constituted as a fetishized measure of masculine reputation"[36] (Bourdieu, 45). Therefore, people feel for her husband: "he surely knew that his wife went with anybody in the bushes. When she had the boys, all color of humans, he could tell they were not his" (LM, 161-2).

Lulu's reading of her situation is different: "No one ever understood my wild and secret ways. They used to say Lulu Lamartine was like a cat, loving no one, only purring to get what she wanted. But that's not true" (LM, 276). Lulu's "mirror" is broken; the reflections of the masculine order unrecognizable. It only reflects her alternative discourse to the hegemonic construction of gender relations, with the gender distinctions definitely blurred and the boundaries tricky to pin down. "I was in love with the whole world and all that lived in its rainy arms"(LM, 276).

If the imaginary is the site of cultural contestation that produces and is produced by its own images, Lulu's "mirror" not only defies all cultural prohibitions; it completely destabilizes them by challenging their stereotypical depictions and dismantling the contested hierarchies: "And so when they tell you that I was heartless, a shameless man-chaser, don't ever forget this: I loved what I saw. And yes, it is true that I've done all the things they say. That's not what gets them. What aggravates them is I've never shed one solitary tear. I'm not sorry. That's unnatural. As we all know, a woman is supposed to cry" (LM, 277). She identifies the heart of the conflict: the

presuppositions that guide the construction and significance of the female image. She boldly refuses normalization thus disrupting the hegemony of sexual difference. She just would not take up the role of the submissive, helpless and hapless, docile female body that is prescribed for her. And she has no guilt about it either. Thus her community promptly sanctions for overstepping her boundaries and refusing to play her part.[37]

Men are continuously frustrated with her, confused by the reversal of the *natural* order of things, of the world the way they knew it: "I was jealous because I could not control her or count on her whereabouts" (LM, 135). And this is Nector Kashpaw, the love of her life, talking.

What her submissive wife's duties would amount to are made evident time and again, sometimes with an sarcastic twist, as in the case of what a good wife's reaction to her husband's death would be, and if you think the contemporary Western culture would find *sati* completely unacceptable, think again: "Some people, assuming she had jumped in the grave to be buried along with Henry [her husband] thought much better of her for a while" (LM, 108). Time and time again we have the norm

displayed side by side with Lulu's opposition to it. But she stubbornly refuses to play the part and, thus, disappoints time and time again. Not only she does not think she has become obsolete without her husband, that her life is over because her existence is conditioned by her relationship with him, but instead she chooses to have sex with her brother-in-law after the funeral to comfort herself.

Lulu is not doing all this on her own as an individual act of resistance to the system. She is shaped by a different discourse having different social norms and political codes, and different embodied patterns of action. There is no "lacking" in her construction of femininity. She inherited from Fleur, her mother, powers that, although do not measure up to the mythic powers that made Fleur feared by the whole community, challenge the norms of femininity, Western style. She was " a Pillager kind of woman with a sudden body, fierce outright wishes, a surprising heart"(LM, 71).

Paula Gunn Allen in discussing traditional tribal lifestyles underlines that they are never patriarchal, instead they are "woman-focused" and she lists as "distinguishing features of a woman-centered system: free and easy sexuality and wide latitude in personal

style"(Allen, 2). Thus, we deal with a complete reversal of the Western worldview that produces passive males and dominating, powerful, and assertive women.

The dominant discourse shaping Lulu's values is governed by the old Indian worldview with the hegemony reversed: "{Margaret} Rushes Bear always said that a man has to enter and enter, repeatedly, as if in punishment for having ever left the woman's body. She said the woman is complete. Men must come through us to live" (LM, 82). Thus, in this reconfiguration of social roles, women are complete and men "lacking," and, therefore, dependent upon women, inventing themselves in relation to women, or is the hierarchy so clear-cut? Lulu's hegemonic discourse seems a lot more subtle and accommodating of conflicting meanings. Binary cultural fantasies that commonly define male/female, masculine/feminine, white/Native must be renegotiated because of Lulu's implied refusal to accept the fixed binary logic in favor of the flexible; as the conventional oppositions are no longer so *opposed*: "Right and wrong were shades of meaning, not sides of a coin" (LM, 76).

Nevertheless, Lulu assumes a dominating, aggressive, typically male position (according to the Western dominant discourse) on the opposite sex, completely

inappropriate for a woman, hence the cultural clash: "The cats made me one of them - sleek and without mercy, avid, falling hungry upon the defenseless body. I want to grind men's bones to drink in my night tea. I want to *enter them* [my italics] the way their hot shadows fold into their bodies in full sunlight. I want to be their food, their harmful drink, to taste men like stilled jam at the back of my tongue" (LM, 82). This is a typically male view of the sexual act as an act of domination, down to its construction as penetration, consequently structured in terms of active/passive counterparts, even if it is no longer the usual mechanical domination, but instead penetration is viewed more like an insidious and all-pervasive take-over of the whole being, a complete and indomitable invasion of the entire body of the other. Lulu displays a strong desire to possess men, (even if with a very subtle feminine touch that dulls the edge of aggressiveness into a kind of all encompassing containment) to subject them to her power. Irrespective of the variations, she assumes a typically male position within the traditional Western power relationship. Therefore, she is contesting the order of things and she is destabilizing the fundamental hierarchy of the social order. It is not very clear how the two radically

different worldviews seem to selectively influence people that apparently are part of the same social group, but it is very clear that they coexist uneasily, with frequent clashes even within the same people.

Although ritual based cultures have a different concept of power that does not necessarily involve economic, social, and political power, being more focused instead on the relationship between the human and non-human worlds, Lulu seems to be managing quite well when it comes to stand up for herself and defend her rights. She situates herself again in a typically masculine position: aggressive, dominating, bullying, and pushing people around. When the tribe wants to take her land for a factory they want to build, Lulu is not going to stand idle by: "Before I'd move the Lamartine household I'd hit the tribe with a fistful of paternity suits that would make their heads spin. Some of them had forgotten until then that I'd even had their son. Still others must have wondered. I could see the back neck hair on their wives all over that room prickle" (LM, 285). She seems to know that knowledge is power and she also knows that she is an overachiever. She has no problem taking center stage in a public arena, the tribal council, and openly and shamelessly blackmail the council.

The humor of the situation comes from the reversed relationship of power. On the one side all the tribal heavyweights, some like Nector the tribal chief, in positions of power, real political power, and on the other side Lulu, a widowed housewife with no say at all in tribal governance, no place in the mechanism of power and with no one else on her side to defend her. Yet she is disempowered, but not powerless, and she manages to manipulate the system and beats them at their own game, the law, by shamelessly threatening to expose their dirty secrets. Now clearly her place in the system as the tribal tramp would grant her no such status. According to the dominant discourse shaping apparently everybody else in the tribe but her, to the regulatory ideal materialized in the body through normative practices, she is a despicable immoral little woman that should be ashamed of her position. Women have a value ascribed to them by individual and social validation according to very strict laws of conduct that need to be severely observed or otherwise the offender suffers public repudiation and humiliation.

Instead, Lulu acts just like a man, subject to different laws, who threatens to expose the indiscretions of women that would ruin their reputation, not only

leaving his own intact but maybe even adding some luster to it. The cultural conflict brought to the forefront is over the idealization and degradation of masculinity and femininity, over the separate set of values constructing the two in a phallocentric society that, in this case, can be summed up by "what a stud" versus "what a slut," applied to the exact same set of circumstances discriminated by gender alone. How gender, race, ethnicity and class status are embodied determines how they will affect social interaction. It never dawns on Lulu that she has the short end of the stick in every category. As one sarcastic participant remarks when Lulu is announced to have the floor: "She's had the floor and half the council on it" (LM, 283). If Judith Butler is right and "gender is a corporeal style, a way of acting the body, a way of wearing one's own flesh as a cultural sign," (Bodies That Matter,256) Lulu wears the wrong sign.

Lulu is not totally immune, though, to the Western hegemonic discourse. She constructs part of her femininity closely observing its rules. What makes her really puzzling for the worlds she lives in is that she seems to live in a male dominated world according to her female dominated values, as she strongly believes in the

sacred domain of her femininity, and after seemingly repudiating the cultural prohibitions regulating the feminine, after she appears to be of the wrong gender in a male dominated world, she flaunts her femininity, as she seems to completely buy into the Western ideal of female beauty.

She was raised the Indian way and as a child: "Lulu wore tiny red bead bracelets and doeskin moccasins, quilled with flower designs. Her bright green dress was cinched around her stomach with a leather belt, and her shining hair was braided tightly" (T, 76). But, in spite of her upbringing and ethnic heritage, she departs from the Indian way and completely buys into the white, alien standards of constructing feminine looks. And she also gives early signs of the strange irresistible attraction for feminine props. As a small child in the middle of winter, not to mention a major crisis, she takes the first opportunity that presents itself to wear the fancy shiny patent leather shoes her father, Eli, bought for her and her mother prohibited her from wearing, finding them unsuitable. The price she pays is getting her feet frozen so badly the doctor decided they needed to be amputated. Thus, we have from the first manifestation the classic combination of beauty and physical suffering, the

price to pay, if an extreme case this time. Later, at the Indian boarding school where she was sent "[her] dress was always the hot-orange shame dress" (LM, 68). Thus, her first contacts with the white dress code are not only not encouraging, but utterly disastrous. Nanapush, the one who many years ago had saved her feet warns her: "I'm sure you've forgotten what happened...for if you remembered you would not wear such shoes... - those heels, like tiny knives, and your toes sticking through! You'd wear footwrappings made of rabbit fur for protection, and no fine stockings either" (T, 166).

There still seems to be a lot of ambivalence that may stem from the reaction to the white contact. While Lulu's rejection is obvious and expected, quite apparent in her attack on the construction of white malehood and its privileged position in the structure of power, she appropriates some of the alien values as well.

The standards of beauty, Western style, of which fashion accessories are an important part, prescribe uses females can put their bodies to. Honoring the male that appropriates the woman by looking good on his arm enhances female value. But there are parts in this mass fabrication of female bodies for male consumption she seems to buy into that overlap with traditional tribal

values that approve of free and easy sexuality and the wide acceptance of personal style, only they are sanctioned differently by the two worlds. That could account some for Lulu's latitude in choosing anything she likes, but doesn't really explain her mirroring of the white Western ideal of feminine beauty. Lulu is not even mixedblood. She is all Indian. Her mother is Fleur, and her father is presumably Eli.[38]

Could she be under the same misapprehension that guided Marie Lazarre's construction of her femininity when boasting? "I could have had any damn man on the reservation at the time. And I could have made him treat me like his own life. I looked good. And I looked *white*" [my italics] (LM, 48). Could it be that Lulu wants to meet the Western standards of beauty because she puts a higher value on them? Judging by the implications of such assertions as Marie Lazarre's, everyone else seems to. Or, could it be that it is the *only* standard available. The old ways have died out fashionwise and the only influence is the one Lulu follows? Whatever the case may be, Lulu follows it to the letter. She's "[w]earing a red plaid dress and spear shoes" (LM, 76). She masters the whole arsenal of prescribed gestures for looking *properly* good. "I smoothed down my skirt, fixed

my collar" (LM, 76). And she masters the complicated skills required to achieve the image: "My hair was short, springy, and glossy, curled with a lead stick" (LM, 76). Her style and sexy good looks are not wasted on those around her either: "On some women this [i.e.not having the time to curl permed hair] might look strange, but on Lulu it seems stylish, like the tiny crystal earrings and the French rouge on her cheeks" (LM, 131).

Even more perplexing she seems to have bought completely into some Western prejudices, like ageism, for example. A true forerunner of the baby-boomer generation, she takes exceedingly good care of preserving her looks:

> Now Lamartine was half the considerable size of Grandma, but you would never think of sizes anyway... It was the difference between a house fixed up with paint and picky fence, and a house left to weather away into the soft earth...Lamartine was jacked up, latticed, shuttered and vinyl sided, while Grandma sagged and bulged on her slipped foundations and let her hair go the silver gray of rain-dried lumber." (LM, 237)

There is no question about the way Lulu is disciplining her body to conform to a certain image of femininity, just as there is no question about the Caucasian

standards of beauty being dominant. Fighting to preserve her good, youthful looks in spite of her being a resident at the Senior Citizens Center, Lulu wears "a big, curly light-brown wig" (LM, 238), which is the source of a hilarious episode when she and her life-long lover Nector Kashpaw, now a senile grandfather, have sex in the laundry room. Neither the place, nor the circumstances seem to have any disturbing effect on Lulu, but when in the heat of the moment her wig goes flying off her head, the image is gone, and the party's over. Not that she looked any worse for the disclosure: "She was stiff-necked now, and elegant, even bald, like some alien queen" (LM, 239).

What is truly perplexing is that all this comes from a woman who is more than suspicious of white ways. She seems to reject them blatantly in their entirety, not just the male dominance part, and she refuses to have anything to do with them for fear she might be caught in the mechanism of destruction:

> All through my life I never did believe in human measurement. Numbers, time, inches, feet. All are just ploys for cutting nature down to size. I know the grand scheme of the world is beyond our brains to fathom, so I don't try, just let it in. I don't

> believe in numbering God's creatures. I never let the United States census in my door, even though they say it's good for Indians. Well, quote me. I say that every time they counted us they knew the precise number to get rid of. (LM, 281-2)

Lulu's broken mirror just wouldn't reflect inferiority, marginality, and ugliness no matter what world they come from. So she picks her standards and constructs her identity with these categories not even an option.

## Part II. The World in Black and White

*"So much of what is true about Afro-Americans is not only the African but the American"*[1]

For Toni Morrison, unlike Erdrich, race is always a factor. Although a celebrated novelist, a Nobel Prize winning writer, a distinguished Princeton professor, and like Erdrich part and parcel of Western culture and the American establishment, when Morrison looks in the mirror in she sees a black face.[2] She will identify herself, and will be always identified as black, with all the implications triggered by the label; different for blacks, as well as whites. She is a black writer, although very much an American writer. Mainstream American cultural conventions, largely shaped by white norms, cannot avoid racial stereotyping.

As Anthony Appiah points out: "'identification': [is] the process through which an individual intentionally shapes her projects-including her plans for her own life and her conception of the good-by reference to available labels, available identities" (Color Conscious, 78). And there is a heavy residual burden that these labels carry. Indeed, "we do make choices (of

self), but we don't determine the options among which we choose"(CC, 96), options that are shaped by dominant discourse rooted in binary, hierarchical values.

In spite of all postmodern endeavors, we are still for the most part plagued by binary, hierarchical thinking, and we cannot accept as a society with the concept that different perspectives produced by different value systems can function in different communities with equal validity. This goes for both blacks and whites. From the black perspective, actions and concepts that evidently have nothing to do with race become a racial thing-for instance, lesbianism or suicide are white; and the only requirements to be met are a negative connotation and steadfast denial.

As Appiah's insightful analysis points out, "our account of the significance of race...mistakes identity for culture"(CC, 92). Clearly, blacks are culturally as diverse and mixed as whites are. Yet *race* colors, nevertheless, every aspect of Morrison's novels and her construction of femininity, which is the focus of this chapter.

Gender bias and discrimination have racial overtones to the point where feminism has a black counterpart in womanism, a distinction without a difference. Alice

Walker, who coined the term "womanism," explains its relevance and necessity in highlighting the black history of racial and gender oppression.

Doubtlessly, all races and ethnicities that women belong to have distinct histories. There are fundamental differences between French feminism and Anglo-American feminism. Nevertheless, the object of study prompted by ongoing gender discrimination remains very much a constant no matter which path theoretical exploits tend to favor.

Although Walker claims that womanists are *traditionally*[3] [my italics] universalists, an idea supported by the famous metaphor of the garden that equally accommodates different flowers, well, they are equal but superior, since she makes it a point to assert in a famous pronouncement: "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender".[4]

Patricia Hill Collins, who investigates Walker's text, explains that Walker's position is well grounded in black traditions and foregrounds the idea that the meaning of womanism is different from and superior to feminism. She argues: "[d]efining womanish as the opposite of the 'frivolous, irresponsible, not serious' girlish, Walker constructs black women's experiences in

opposition to those of white women" (10). Basically, her position on white women is the same as that of the patriarchy which feminism is fighting. It is difficult to defend her view that the dominant discourse is right in discriminating against and oppressing white women, but is wrong in discriminating against and oppressing black women when the patriarchy discriminates and oppresses all women. Being so intent to separate black women from white women, Collins, like Walker, joins forces with the enemy she is supposed to fight. She reinforces the position of the dominant discourse to make a racial point. According to Fredrickson, racism is based on the belief that the differences between races make it impossible for them to coexist on terms of equality.[5]

Morrison, too, believes that race is the determining factor for black people in America in ways in which it is not for any other race. "The interest in vision, in seeing, is a fact of black life. As slaves and ex-slaves, black people were manageable and findable, as no other slave society would be, because they were black. So there is an enormous impact from the simple division of color - more than sex, age, or anything else. The complaint is not being seen for what one is. That is the reason why my hatred of white people is justified and their hatred for

me is not." (Toni Morrison: Critical Perspective Past and Present, 376).

This problem of color and visibility also highlights a fundamental inconsistency in Western philosophy's preference for presence over absence, and for things that are visible over things that are invisible, used by some feminists, like Luce Irigaray[6] for example, to explain privileging the masculine over the feminine, since the visible black race clearly enjoyed no such privileged position.

Morrison has to place herself within a complex and often contradictory inheritance. Black women have a history of slavery, which makes them the objects of race, class, and gender oppression. There is a history of stereotyping them as "the other." Racist ideology and imagery long constructed non-European races as primitive and even savage. Ever since the Hottentot Venus toured London and Paris at the end of the eighteenth century exhibiting a South African woman as living proof of the animalistic features of black women, the popular sexual myth of voluptuousness and lasciviousness has been firmly in place. Thus, in a patriarchal culture that views women as sex objects, black women are granted a special distinction.

African-American slave women were subjected to a process of explicit and vicious commodification.[7] Their bodies were valued as to the most productive and lucrative parts. In a racist society in which slaves equaled profit, they were not only dehumanized, but also practically tabulated into body parts, evaluated and explcited individually for the diverse profits to be made.[8] Forced to labor like men, the women's physical strength, their strong backs and muscles, were of special importance to their owners. Their hands would nurse white and black babies, and bring a profit as domestic servants used for serving the white household, and then their own black household. Their vaginas were exploited for sexual pleasure and their womb was used as a baby-making machine, as sex (often rape) plus its consequences equaled money on the slave market, not a bad deal for the slave owners. Thus, reading the black female body came to be defined by the tension between its simultaneous masculinization on the one hand, and feminization by hypereroticization on the other.

Hopefully, today's society's views are changed, or at least most people are aware that it's *wrong* to stereotype, but black stereotypes, just like other stereotypes, have not disappeared and still shape to a

great extent our reading of the black body, as well as the black perception of it, hence Morrison's contemporary "complaint of not being seen for what one is."

Foucault elaborates on what is entailed by the process of seeing. "The eye...in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking [is] an absurdity and a nonsense. There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival knowing" (Foucault, GM, 119) [9] And that perspective is still heavily indebted to a history of prejudice, abuse, and exploitation.

That may be one reason why, in David B. Wilkins's words: "black Americans know that their individual chances for achieving success in America are linked to the advancement of the race as a whole" (CC, 92). Throughout American history blacks have been subjected to negative stereotyping as inferior intellectually, but also lacking in character and moral values. They were seen as stupid, dirty, lazy, licentious, irresponsible, arrogant, and generally prone to criminal behavior. Many people still feel today that the disproportionate number of black criminals filling up the jails may have something do with race, rather than education or economic

prospects, never even suspecting that "group failure may be evidence of injustice to individuals" (CC, 99).

The current culture of gansta rap music [10] refusing to assimilate the white norms of speech and behavior, reinforces the negative stereotypes of the irresponsible, violent, misogynistic, arrogant, unlawful black man, without doing much to counteract the stereotypes pointing to the lack of civilization, education, or respect for common values.[11] White rap has not changed this situation.

Evidently, the "reading" of these cultural phenomena conveys the perspective of middle-class respectability and hypocrisy, but it is prevalent in society and being aware of it doesn't solve the problem. In The Souls of Black Folk W.E.B. DuBois characterizes it as "double-consciousness:" "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others,"[12] and it can be extended to include all underprivileged categories. There is always tension between the values of the dominant discourse that shape our wishes, ideas of personal success and self-esteem and their realization if black, or gay, or a woman. If anything but mainstream, that is white, male, heterosexual, and middle class, one will always be restricted by the impossibility to conform to the prescribed values and expectations, by the inability

to be non-black, or non-gay, or non-woman that comes always at a price for the offender, sometimes with dire consequences.

At the same time, "[t]he politics of recognition requires that one's skin color, one's sexual body, should be politically acknowledged in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and their sexual body as personal dimensions of the self. And 'personal' doesn't mean 'secret' but 'not too highly scripted,' 'not too constrained' by the demands and expectations of others"(CC, 99). In other words, if one is not readily conforming to the role prescribed for him/her, one will be forced into more disparaging labels like: the straight-acting gay, or the sell-out white-acting black. It's a sort of "damned if you do and damned if you don't" vicious circle. We don't like to be disappointed, confused, or confronted with uncomfortable borderline cases that would elicit a reevaluation of the prescribed roles as they won't fit neatly into our categories. Instead, for our peace of mind, we push them into the same categories anyway, only this time with a more unflattering twist, an added stigma for not readily complying and being troublesome on top of it.

But the fact is that bodies cannot be just personal dimensions of the self. Bodies are "totally imprinted by history."[13] The damage done by such social pressures may force people into prescribed roles and often result in annihilating them, in forcing them to play roles in which they do not recognize themselves and therefore feel alienated from themselves. Historically, they have been fractured by betraying their own substance, forced into manifestations that destroyed for them every possibility for authentic self-expression and eventually resulted in self-hatred.

On the other hand, the very construction of the illusion of the "self," according to Lacan is based on alienation and separation through internalizing the notion of "other" in the Mirror Stage. Personal failure may point to individual inability to adjust; group failure may point to bigger issues, though.

Identities, which revolve around the body, are historically, socially, and culturally constructed and performative, including race, gender, and sexuality. There is no genetic basis for the idea of race.[14] Black Americans have a double identity. They are American and they have the black tradition they were born into. Black American women are twice "the other" as black, and as

women. As women, they are, in Simone de Beauvoir's view elaborated upon in her famous book *The Second Sex*, the absolute "other" of Western culture. Trudier Harris asserts that Toni Morrison has applied the stereotypical conceptions of female body as "other," popular in black oral literature, to her fiction.[15]

Any way one looks at it, black women were the victims of brutal white men, subjected to racial oppression and victims of gender oppression. Even within the struggle for black liberation, black women were placed in a subsidiary position. In the black liberation movement, the assumption was that racism was more harmful to black men than it was to black women because its restrictions and limitations upon black men affected not only their personal liberty of expressing their manhood, but the essence of manhood itself in a different, and, it is implied, more severe way than it did black womanhood. Thus, the real tragedy of racism is purportedly the loss of manhood. The construction of black masculinity is dependent on the subservience of black women.[16] The position is so one-sided that, according to Wallace, "to black people, rape means the lynching of a black man. Obsession with the lynching of the black man seems to leave no room in the black male consciousness for any

awareness of the oppression of black women" (120). The position is indefensible, and moreover self-defeating, not only because it denies black women their basic humanity, but also because it goes against the scope of racial liberation itself by showing total compliance with the values of the patriarchal establishment and its way of defining masculinity, that is, the same Western patriarchal system the black liberation movement is supposedly fighting in the first place.

Ever since Aristotle, who was the first to articulate philosophically the dichotomy active/passive, spirit/body, the male has been associated with the active, conscious principle and the female with the passive, vegetative, primitive matter. The gendered nature of the mind/body dualism and its institutional and cultural expression have been openly or insidiously prominent, pervading all layers of thinking for ages now. Obviously, black men could not be immune to them. Sexual passivity, acceptance of male domination, nurturing motherhood, dependency are all part of female nature.

The family structure that provided for U.S. black women refuge from white domination did not provide for them refuge from gender roles, just as it didn't for white women. Because the cultural ideal of black manhood

suffered extensively during slavery, men having been emasculated, lynched, and brutalized, black men today enjoy a privileged status inaccessible to black women.

Although in her articles and interviews Morrison unequivocally rejects black feminist criticism, she does give the most important position to matriarchal families in her novels. Morrison's women also have a special role in the inheritance of African values and African culture. Her black women are the culture bearers and show extraordinary resilience in the face of considerable odds.

The vast majority of black women have been subject to yet another oppression, class oppression. Having been poor, black women always worked to support their families, just as poor white women did, therefore enjoying the "freedom" to work outside the home not as an alternative to domestic labor and oppression, of course, but as an extension of it. Most of them traditionally had to support the family economically as a well as emotionally, as heads of their household.

Often called "the mule of the world," dehumanized as "built to last," the black female body was considered suitable for hard manual labor. The Victorian objectification of womanhood characterized by "piety,

purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, the cult of true womanhood"[17] - creating delicate, feeble, helpless beings in need of masculine protection - never applied to black women, not even in theory. By contrast, they were construed as unfeminine, unnatural, and ugly. The black female body has been viewed as grotesque and abnormal, quite the opposite of the true, good and beautiful.

Sondra O'Neale traces the devaluation black women were subject to in her "Inhibiting Midwifes, Usurping Creators." "[T]hrough the use of thoroughly pejorative connotations in literature and art created to accommodate the emerging slave trade, black women were presented in societal media as icons of evil rather than examples of divine beauty. [...] From the position of queen, lover, muse, and pedestaled wife [ she is referring to biblical representation such as the Queen of Sheba], she became a symbol of sexual excess in the white mind" (142).

The physical body is paramount to the construction of identity, self-image and a sense of empowerment. Most black women have been denied the beauty, pleasure and potential of their own bodies for longer and in more radical ways than white women have. "Historically relegated to the auction block instead of the pedestal, the black female body has been constructed as the ugly

end of a wearisome Western dialectic: not sacred but profane, not angelic but demonic, not fair lady but ugly darkly."[18] The black female body was dehumanized, "demonized, debased, raped and dismissed," "made a site of impropriety and crime."[19] Blackness was perceived as ugliness. It became the strong and ugly counterpart of the fragile, graceful, delicate white beauty.

Freud talks about the "narcissism of minor differences" when explaining how people tend to measure themselves and others by the ideal foregrounded by a particular society. Those who come closest to the ideal are considered superior, as he traces a direct link between standards of beauty and the sense of superiority. (Civilization, 10)

The desirability of whiteness, and if impossible, the next best thing, the imitation of whiteness, was imposed upon black women since whiteness was constructed as the mark of beauty, prestige, pride, and security. It is so persistent a phenomenon that to this day, well after the "black is beautiful" revolution, even successful, powerful black women are afflicted by it. Serena Williams, the younger of the Williams sisters who have imposed themselves as powerhouses in the white world of tennis, alternates native braiding hairdos with

coloring her hair blonde. Queen Latifah, who is particularly proud of her black heritage and who does a consistent job of promoting the values of black women, when hosting *Saturday Night Live* on March 15, 2003 had blondish straight hair while being sarcastic about a *sister* hosting the show every seventeen years. (That's how long the show has been on.)

But this take, the mainstream reading of the phenomenon, also reveals that apparently there are acceptable identities that can be tolerated, and there are those that are offensive in their run-ins with the dominant cultural imagery. If one looks into the meanings and politics of the options, it is easy to see that similar choices are read differently based on race alone. A black woman flashing blond straight hair is perceived as a traitor to her racial heritage, a white-acting black. White women wearing the ethnic cornrows made popular by the fashion shows are seen as "cool" and open minded.

Definitely the history of black female struggle with identity and beauty issues plays a big part in it. Because mainstream American beauty standards exclude African-American physical features, black women following what came to be regarded as white standards are perceived

as complying with the dominant cultural imagery and thus reinforcing it, whereas white women going ethnic are seen as defying it. It is nevertheless a fact that black women, who when it comes to hair, have, courtesy of their genetics, more choices available to them, are restricted and penalized for exercising them at will. It is the oppressive gaze of the dominant culture that allots *subject* positions.

The conception of black femininity has to be sorted out from the tensions and struggles of both masculinization and excessive feminization which hypereroticized them on the one hand, and fighting the white ideal of beauty and accepting instead and expanding the understanding of blackness and black femininity, on the other.

One of Toni Morrison's ongoing interests, a subject of this chapter, is the construction of female bodies in her novels. As she says in an interview, "[h]ow contemporary [black] women looked at the stereotype of black women. Did they accept that role? Did the writers believe, in the works we studied, that that was pretty much the way we were? Were there characters representative of the mammy, whore, whatever? Showgirl, whatever? And emasculation and so on? How political were

they?"[20] Her answers to these questions have generated a gallery of powerful female characters who defy cultural stereotypes and who always have center stage in her novels.

Another concern that this chapter addresses regards the racial perception of her novels that Morrison is bent on eliciting. She confessed she was "[i]nterested in educating or clarifying or stimulating something, some response in the white community."[21]

I will examine how the complex issues mentioned above translate into female bodies in Morrison's subversive and unsettling postmodern narrative. I choose female characters that make a powerful statement challenging established norms of femininity. I will also underscore the important part mainstream American values play in undermining the texture of her construction of female characters, such as the male perspective she adopts that actually challenges the challenge.

II. 1. Sula: the Victim Turned Predator

Morrison constructs the outrageous Sula, the title character of her second novel, as the ultimate pariah in contrast to her friend Nell, the *decent* woman, loving wife and mother, wronged wife left to raise her children on her own by a cheating husband. Nell is a character who

buys completely into the traditional female roles as a woman, as a wife and as a mother without questioning any of them.

Nell is raised by Helene Wright, (as frequently noted by critics quite appropriately *Right*), her mother, a woman who dedicates her life to distancing herself from the stereotype of the prostitute (embodied by Helene's Creole whore mother), and who ends up at the other end of the spectrum, the decent end, embodying the stereotype of the virtuous middle-class woman, the counterpart of the prostitute in a patriarchal system of values. But she cannot distance herself far enough from the system to acknowledge that feminine roles don't win at the game of patriarchy.

Helene tries hard but fights a losing battle with a racist and sexist world. The embodiment of white middle-class conformity, she is a "tall, proud woman...very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequaled elegance, who could quell a roustabout with a look" (19). Displaying a typically Victorian *feminine* way of thinking, she believes that her "best protection [is] her manner and her bearing, to which she would add a beautiful dress" (17). As long as she sticks to the rules of propriety, as long as she holds her part

of the bargain and proves that she is the *right* kind of woman, surely, she will be protected and should be safe on her trip South. But Morrison shows otherwise.

All Helene's grace is lost on the working-class redneck white conductor. All he can see is a *black woman* passing through a car for whites she got on by mistake. The situation perfectly illustrates Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory that "it is never our objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body."[22] In a racist society, blackness takes precedence and erases all the other signifiers.

The public humiliation of being called "gal" and treated as a second-class citizen traumatizes Helene to the extent that she begins questioning her own worth. "[A]ll the old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble" (18). An identity so long and painstakingly constructed to fit a certain image of respectability proves ineffective and crumbles at the injustice. She also dramatizes the typical victim's reaction of internalizing injustice and oppression, of trying to make sense of an abusive situation by looking for explanations inside rather than outside of her, by assuming guilt.[23]

To make matters worse, Helene's instinctive reaction is to smile "dazzlingly and coquettishly" (18). She cannot understand herself the reaction that adds insult to injury in her own eyes and in the eyes of the black people in the car who were watching the scene. But it is her defense mechanism that got activated when she sensed danger, very much like a cuttlefish would release ink to throw an attacker off track. It may sound like a cliché, and it is, but it is also the only weapon a woman was given to manipulate men in a patriarchal world. This is way back in the time when girl power equaled flirting. (Morrison gives the year 1920 as title of the chapter.) Helene is just following the rules.

It may seem perplexing that a black woman is shaped to such an extent by white middle-class conventions, by this kind of petty bourgeois mentality, but it is not unprecedented, and I don't think it can be dismissed as Morrison's interference with the character. It is even more perplexing to find the same symptom in a slave narrative, which is not *fiction*, it's not supposed to be *made-up*, it is supposed to "record" authentic events yet still it happens. Harriet Jacobs, at some point in relating her ordeals as a slave at the hands of her master in her book Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl,

vividly recalls the scene and the embarrassment of having to wait on guests at the dinner table. Considering that in the slave hierarchy the domestic servants enjoyed a privileged status as compared to those laboring in the field, her reaction can only be read by a different standard. The upper-class attitude that menial tasks degrade and should be left to servants as a class distinction only shows that blacks and whites are subject to clan hierarchic influences, and therefore share similar prejudices.

In Harriet Jacobs' case critics argue that she was under the influence of the sentimental novel when writing her book, and that she deliberately adopted certain conventions in order to be able to reach her audience. This might make sense when it comes to the narrative techniques, but when she is telling her side of the story of slavery adopting white upper-class values in judging the position she has been in and the injustices she had to suffer, the choice becomes problematic. Either she adopts a completely alien value system in relating the suffering she went through to make it easier for her audience to relate to her (but that would imply that her story is fake, that what one reads is not what she actually went through emotionally and intellectually,) or

and more likely, coming from a privileged slave family (which is not a contradiction in terms when one reads her story, a family in which her grandmother, for example, was held in high esteem by the community of blacks and whites alike and was highly valued for her many accomplishments, not least of which her moral stature), Harriet Jacobs belongs to the elite, and displays their mentality.

In Morrison's novel it is not only Helene Wright and her daughter Nell that are under the influence of the white middle-class value system. Eva, Sula's grandmother, is too, to a great extent. Even Sula, although a destroyer equally showing her contempt for all values, clearly applies the white middle-class value system just like the other women in her family in the way she dresses. Their moral code, especially Eva's when judging other women dealing with their men, points in the same direction.

Nell is forever scarred by the conductor incident, and has a similar reaction to her mother's, that is to try even harder (as if it had been her fault for failing) "to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way" (19).

Helene makes it her duty to raise Nell "obedient and polite"(16). A strikingly beautiful woman, Helene is relieved that her daughter did not take after her. Nell "had taken the broad flat nose of Wiley (although Helene expected to improve it somewhat) and his generous lips" (16). It seems odd that, while she takes pride in following the white ideal of beauty and morality herself, she doesn't wish her daughter to be beautiful. But this is just an apparent contradiction. She doesn't want her daughter to be too beautiful, just as she doesn't want her daughter to be too *black*, and consequently straightens her hair and tries hard to make her nose not look flat. In the petty bourgeois mentality, excess is an attack on good manners. At the same time Helene tries to protect her daughter because she knows that visibility makes one a target.

After making friends with the rebellious Sula, Nell has a change of attitude, but even that takes place privately and quietly, without her openly confronting the issue. "After she met Sula, Nell slid the clothespin under the blanket as soon as she got in bed. And although there was still the hateful hot comb to suffer through each Saturday evening, its consequences - smooth hair- no longer interested her" (47). Sula provides her with an

alternative to middle-class propriety. Following her example changes Nell's priorities and she no longer fights an uphill battle against being black. Sula shows her that it is all right to be black and not care about it.

But Nell is not Sula and in spite of Sula's example Nell will grow up to be the stereotypical woman, every man's dream. Her husband Jude marries her because "[h]e chose the girl who had always been kind, who had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest" (71). Her dutiful playing of the role of the passive prey, of the submissive woman, is what gives her value in Jude's eyes. He was looking for " someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up" (71). Completely swept up by the marriage myth and figuring he could keep his end of the conventional bargain, he thought that "in return he would shelter her, love her, grow old with her"(71).

But his deeper motive was that he wanted to become "head" of family, a position that would grant him a rise in social status. "Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one

Jude"(71). The totally male perspective is hard to miss. Nell will disappear into him, as is fit for women in patriarchal societies, to make *Jude* whole.

The nurturing, domestic qualities so becoming in a woman whose duty is to comfort and support get the better of Nell who is won over by the possibility of playing the recognizable role her mother and the world she lives in prepared her for. "Nell's indifference to his hints disappeared when she discovered his pain....She actually wanted to help, to soothe" (71). According to Ajax's (the alpha male of the novel) sarcastic remarks, "[a]ll they [women] want, man, is their own misery. Ax em to die for you and they yours for life"(71). They just dutifully enter their prescribed role. At least Nell did, because " except for an occasional leadership role with Sula, she had no aggression. Her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had" (72).

Toni Morrison has Sula highlight her total disgust in presenting her scathing remarks on conventional women such as Nell and Helene and the ways in which they are ontologically dependent on men. "The narrower their lives, the wider their hips. Those with husbands had folded themselves into starched coffins, their sides

bursting with other people's skinned dreams and bony regrets. Those without men were like sour-tipped needles featuring one constant empty eye. Those with men had had the sweetness sucked from their breath by ovens and steam kettles" (105). The puzzling thing is that this virulent indictment is not directed at the patriarchal system or the men benefiting from it by denying women any prospects, but clearly at the sacrificial women generated in the process. Morrison takes a typically male perspective here.

Sula comes from a family of unconventional, powerful women with little regard for social graces. Their only acknowledgment of any rules is when they need to manipulate them for their own good. Eva, Sula's grandmother, rumor has it, stuck her leg under a train to make the company pay off, so she could feed her children after her husband left her, a husband who "liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third" (27). Same stereotype: wronged wife deserted by a cheating husband and left to raise her children alone, very different outcome from Nell's in this case. Eva is a fighter with no regard for conventions or niceties. Her reality is stripped to the bare essentials, so much so that her daughter Hannah cannot comprehend it and keeps

asking her whether she loved them as kids, meaning played with them. "What would I look like leapin' 'round that little room playin' with youngins with three beets to my name?" (60)

Heading her household on her crutches, the matriarch draws strength and support from the knowledge that she succeeded in beating the system, saving her children, and from the strong hatred of her husband: "it was hating him that kept her alive and happy" (32).

Eva seems oblivious to the tyranny of normality, that is to both normalizing human bodies as well as to the rules sanctioning deviation from it, while reading correctly other rules about constructing beautiful female bodies, as if choosing which rules to follow and which to dismiss as it suits her. "Eva always wore a black laced-up shoe that came well above her ankle. Nor did she wear overlong dresses to disguise the empty place on her left side. Her dresses were mid-calf so that her one glamorous leg was always in view as well as the long fall of space below her left thigh" (27). Thus, she closely follows the fashion rules and the importance of different body parts in evaluating a beautiful female body. It never seems to occur to her that deliberately showing off her "glamorous leg" would automatically draw attention to the

missing leg, to her infirmity, nor does this seem to occur to her gentlemen callers. She is very comfortable with her body, infirmity and all, and knows how to manipulate both her assets and other people to her advantage. She wears her missing leg like a badge of honor, much like a soldier would display a wound from battle as a sign of sacrifice, in a very male fashion, unlike a woman. Women are usually self-conscious of their bodily imperfections and, therefore, would be apprehensive about drawing attention to, let alone showing off, their mutilated body.

Beginning with Eva, the Peace women have a very different attitude about gender relations. They are all without relationships to men in the conventional sense of the word and display no interest in legalizing a union, having no apparent illusions about the merit of the sacrificial role of women when it comes to gender relations. When they need men, they just take what they need in a very masculine fashion, with total disregard for social rules. But they are not man-haters; they like their independence and control over their own lives. "With the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters" (35).

This "manlove" is manifested in the most socially unacceptable manner. The values of exclusivity, virtue, commitment, purity in giving seem never even to occur to Hannah, Sula's mother. "Hannah simply refused to live without the attentions of a man, and after Rekus' death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors" (36). There is a clear line of separation between sex and involvement, highlighting her male attitude. "Hannah was fastidious about whom she slept with. She would fuck practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment" (37). She also displays no interest whatsoever in concerning herself with her image, the way she is perceived by men, or the way she looks in general, other very unfeminine traits.

As opposed to Helene, who was content that "she rose *grandly* [my italics] to the position of motherhood" (15) because she was able to raise her daughter *properly*, Eva displays ferocious motherly love not only in her determination to keep her children alive, but to protect them at all costs. When she sees her firstborn, Hannah, catch fire in the yard, Eva jumps out of the window to cover her child's body with her own. "She lifted her heavy frame up on her good leg, and with fists and arms

smashed the windowpane. Using her stump as a support on the windowsill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window. Cut and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing figure" (65). She displays the same brand of tough love when she puts her son Plum out of his misery by killing him herself, not being able to watch his ordeal, and accepting that she could not help him.

The last of the Peace line, Sula is the ultimate pariah. As Morrison explains, "[t]here are several levels of the pariah figure working in my writing. The black community is a pariah community. Black people are pariahs. The civilization of black people that lives apart from but in juxtaposition to other civilizations is a pariah relationship.... But a community contains pariahs within it that are very useful for the conscience of that community." Following Morrison's line of reasoning, Sula is the quintessential pariah.

Sula doesn't seem to have any respect for rules, laws, customs, or people. She is the one that unites the community in their unanimous condemnation of her. The reason that she is viewed as an evil witch is that there is no clear explanation for the strange things she does and people cannot make her out.

When she was a young girl, she took part is an ambiguous episode in which her behavior was dubious at best. In what might have been an accident, she drowns a little boy, Chicken, she is playing with. Her reaction after the fact is hard to explain. Sula and Nell, who witnessed the incident, react as co-conspirators. Without lifting a finger to try and save the boy or get help, their only worry is that "somebody saw" (52). There is no indication of clear intent or premeditation on Sula's part, and there is no explanation for the two girls' reaction after it happens. It just doesn't add up. We, as readers, aren't given the necessary information to "read" the episode and are left hanging, unable to quite make sense of it. We aren't given a motive for Sula's act or her reaction to it. We don't know why she did it or what she was thinking, basically what is driving her at any time. One piece of information, if taken at face value, discredits the other. This is the exact position the Bottom community finds itself in, left puzzled but hostile nevertheless to the impenetrable Sula. Morrison explains that [she] "thought of Sula as a cracked mirror, fragments and pieces that we have to see independently and put together."[24]

Even more disturbing Sula watches her own mother, Hannah, burn to death and doesn't even try to help her. Her grandmother, Eva, "had seen Sula standing on the back porch watching...and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (67). The community could believe either Sula's reaction was one of horror, which left her paralyzed and incapable of reacting, or one of being evil and not wanting to help. But Sula is "interested," as usual moving beyond community's expectations slipping away into incomprehensible territory. We never get Sula's explanation on either incident-nor Morrison's.

Sula's values are hard to figure out. Ordinarily clear oppositions like good/evil or virgin/whore don't operate in her case because she doesn't acknowledge them. She moves beyond them, thus avoiding the trap of being caught in the system and reinforcing it irrespective of the choice she makes, as Helene or Nell do. Sula is *different*. Unlike Hannah who is only intent on fulfilling her needs and is kind and generous, Sula uses everybody and everything, discards them, and enjoys it.

She eludes the oppressive social norms commonly embedded in the representations and images of women. She

has no affiliations, and doesn't *belong*. She doesn't belong the way women feel they belong to their men or their families. Sula is fiercely independent, just like a man. Her character dramatizes the fierce struggle to empower difference. There is always tension between the historical construction of bodies, the taboos and prohibitions they are limited by and the *subject* positions that imply a certain amount of self-expression. In the case of Sula this tension escalates to a full-fledged war.

Sula moves between worlds, leaves Bottom, a place not accidentally bearing a meaningful name, goes to college and experiences the big city. She clearly enjoys independence of movement, traditionally a male prerogative. She comes back, therefore, apparently suggesting that she rejects the white value system. Although for the black community returning home is a sign of success not failure,[25] when she comes back she surprisingly flaunts white upper-class standards. She is dressed like a movie star, and she astonishes everyone (readers included) with her newly acquired image. "A black crepe dress splashed with pink and yellow zinnias, foxtails, a black felt hat with the veil of net lowered over one eye. In her right hand was a beaded clasp and in

her left a red leather traveling case, so small, so charming - no one had seen anything like it before, including the mayor's wife and the music teacher, both of whom had been to Rome" (78). This could well be, except for the questionable taste of her extravagance, Helene. It is clearly conventional feminine beauty constructed according to the fashion of the day. Yet Sula carries the image away from the world that fashioned her in this manner and into Bottom.

As for the community she returns to, Sula displays her blistering rejection of the life style of the Bottom women in no uncertain terms. She rejects every rule and destroys every myth. As Rosemarie Garland Thompson argues, "[t]he extraordinary aspect of her body makes her a spectacle among spectators, the point of reference for social boundaries. The body that violates the norms becomes a marked pariah and disrupter of the social order."[26]

Although coming from a family of matriarchs, Sula makes no concessions to the idea of family either, as if her sole purpose would be to disregard all established values, black and white. After watching her mother burn to death, she harasses her old grandmother, Eva, again, for no clear reason. "Maybe one night when you dozing in

that wagon flicking flies and swallowing spit, maybe I'll just tip on up there with some kerosene and-who knows-you may make the brightest flame of them all. So Eva locked her door from then on. But it did no good. In April two men came with a stretcher and she didn't even have time to comb her hair before they strapped her to a piece of canvas." (81).

For the black community it was an outrageous thing to do. "White people didn't fret about putting their old ones away. It took a lot for black people to let them go, and even if somebody was old and alone, others did the dropping by, the floor washing, the cooking. Only when they got crazy and unmanageable were they let go. Unless it was somebody like Sula, who put Eva away out of meanness" (141). It is at this point the verdict is in; Sula is regarded by the community as pure evil, "the classic type of evil force."[27]

Another myth she shatters for the black community is that black women are the guiltless victims of brutal white men. Shattering this myth makes her an outcast because it runs against a historic image built into the black identity. "But it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable

thing-the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white men" (97).

The fact is that she is colorblind when it comes to men. She is not white and she is not black, just as she isn't completely shaped by the values of any community, only by her constant rejection of authority. There is no doubt about the oppressive, biased position of the men passing judgment. The double standard is in full swing. Gender is the decisive factor in establishing the moral condemnation of similar actions. "[T]he willingness of black men to lie in the beds of white women [was not] a consideration that might lead them toward tolerance. They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with the same venom that white people did" (98).

Sula's choice of men doesn't reveal a more enlightened take on racial issues either, just her inconsistency and arbitrariness in picking and choosing her position. Actually, when it comes to racism, she elevates it to therapeutic levels, as when she tries to

cure Jude's self-inflicted bout of low self-esteem. "White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is to cut a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed....They think rape soon's they see you and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain" (89). There is a perfect parallel, a mirror image of black racism against whites and white racism against blacks down to the phrasing of the taboo of interracial gender relations.

In all the choices she makes Sula acts like a man. Morrison says: "[s]he is a masculine character in that sense. She will do the kinds of things that normally only men do, which is why she's so strange. She really behaves like a man. She picks up a man, drops a man, the same way a man picks up a woman, drops a woman. And that's her thing. She's masculine in that sense. She's adventuresome, she trusts herself, she's not scared, she really ain't scared. And she is curious and will leave and try anything. So that quality of masculinity - and I

mean this in the pure sense - in a woman at that time is outrage, total outrage."[28]

She acts like a man even as a young girl. When attacked by four white Irish boys who "occasionally entertained themselves in the afternoon by harassing black schoolchildren" (45) and who had harassed Nell before, Sula never shies away; instead, the skinny little twelve year old confronts them head on from a position of force and manages to scare them off. She cuts off her fingertip to scare them off and *protect* Nell.

From an early age Sula and Nell are under no illusion as to their range of possibilities. "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (44). The ways they choose to go about it turns out very different though. Sula rebels against and defies everything. She has no boundaries to confine her and no limits to restrict her behavior.

Sula may know that she is neither male nor white, but she clearly refuses to act like a black or a woman, that is to give up her freedom. She even triumphs in breaking every conceivable convention that holds the community together. She seems overly conscious that,

"There is no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter."[29]

Sula lacks traditionally feminine characteristics such as making small talk, having compassion, or providing comfort because she, perhaps a sociopath, has no empathy. She holds nothing sacred and doesn't care at all, for instance, about hurting her life-long friend Nell whose life Sula shatters, again for no good reason, when she has sex with Nell's husband, Jude. Obviously, friendship is not one of the things she values, but neither is decency or other common social precepts. She not only has sex with Jude but reduces the authority figure Nell's world revolves around to the status of an animal "down on all fours naked" (90).

The community is united by their unanimous condemnation of Sula. She offends men and women alike. She threatens their world as they know it, but they fight back too. She is against everyone and everything but everyone and everything is against her too. The struggle gets more acute throughout the novel. The community associates Sula with the most disgusting pests and predators. Their hatred and resentment reduce her to a

subhuman level. Sula is a "roach" (97), her birthmark over her eye is a "copperhead" or a "rattlesnake" (89). It's a game of mutual annihilation.

Without guilt or shame Sula is impenitent and unapologetic to the end. On her deathbed she confronts Nell with the ultimate defiance about the authority empowered to construct their lives and shows a last time her ultimate contempt for it. "About who was good. How do you know it was you?...I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me" (126).

II. 2. Jadine: Political Resistance as Racial Suicide

Morrison constructs the main character of her fourth novel Tar Baby, Jadine, in opposition to Son and the black woman in Paris, both meant to represent authentic black people. Morrison uses for both names (or lack of one in the case of the black woman in Paris,) that do not individualize, but depersonalize instead, as if trying to dissolve them into their category. They come to signify the generic black man and woman.

Jadine, on the other hand, completely stands out as the exception to the rule in every way: exceptionally intelligent, exceptionally beautiful, exceptionally successful. As opposed to the way the dominant discourse traditionally constructed black women's bodies as ugly,

she is beautiful enough to parade her body on the fashion catwalks, the modern counterpart of the traditional pedestal. An orphan educated at the Sorbonne through the generosity of a wealthy white couple her black aunt Ondine and uncle Sydney work for as domestic servants, she is sophisticated, comfortable with European culture and values and doesn't know much about black culture. Well-traveled and having a degree in Fine Arts, she derives a sense of security from her financial independence and her successful career as a black model. As Houston Baker jr. argues, with Jadine "Morrison invents a female character who will not be maternal, but will try to get beyond an ideology which identifies woman with nurturing and caretaking" (*Maternal Narratives*, 268). Morrison invents her and then vilifies her.

Son, on the other hand, is her complete opposite. He comes from a small, rural, isolated black community in Florida. He is the poster child for extreme, backward views towards mainstream America, channeling his frustrations, lack of prospects, and personal failures and inability to make anything of himself into a relentless hate and contempt for whites. Very black, with dreadlocks, a fugitive from the law, he breaks into the Streets' Caribbean mansion where Jadine spends Christmas,

appalling blacks and whites alike. (With the exception of Valerian Street, the owner of the mansion Jadine's uncle and aunt work for, who refuses to be appalled because his game is to antagonize his wife Margaret who is horrified at finding Son hiding in her bedroom.)

Paramount to decoding Morrison's novel is the story of the tar baby. The story is based on an old African American folk tale about Br'er Rabbit and Tar Baby. It is a variety of the trickster story. In traditional African American stories usually the slave is depicted as the trickster outsmarting his master and getting away with his wrongdoings without getting punished. In this story Br'er Fox catches Br'er Rabbit with the help of a tar baby. Br'er Rabbit hits the tar figure, getting stuck, but gains his freedom by persuading Br'er Fox to throw him into the briar patch. In his introduction to *The Book of Negro Folklore* Arna Bontemps explains that essential for Br'er Rabbit, a traditional trickster, is his ability to outwit the bigger and stronger animals.

Karen Baker-Fletcher argues in her article "Tar Baby and Womanist Theology" that Morrison explores the Westernized, plantation version of the story in her novel (3). In an interview Morrison herself explains that in the Western version of the story it is a white man who

uses the tar baby to catch a rabbit. She also explains that "tar baby" is similar to "nigger," and that white people use it for black children, especially black girls (Baker-Fletcher, 30). As for Morrison, "for [her] tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. The story was a point of departure to history and prophesy" (LeClair, 26-7).

Critics have analyzed the use of the allegory in Morrison's novel trying to identify who is the rabbit and who is the tar baby, playing out all the possible combinations, including seeing both Jadine and Son as tar baby and trickster.[30] Identification is tricky (mostly because both Jadine and Son are built on ambivalence,) and reveals as much about Morrison's choices and the way she constructs her characters as about the ones performing the identification, as the process foregrounds race, gender, and class biases and prejudices.

Economically and socially successful, Jadine, a black woman, makes it to the top in a white male world. She is clearly the opposite of the traditional black woman focused on family and motherhood. Refusing to submit to the racial, gender, and cultural roles prescribed for her, in a defiant act of political resistance, she makes the transgression from black woman

to white male. She rejects the role of mother, daughter, and "woman" the way they are constructed by her community. When her aunt tries to instill in her the values of a "real" woman, she tells her in no ambiguous terms, "I don't want to be...like you....I don't want to learn how to be the kind of woman you're talking about because I don't want to be that kind of woman" (TB, 243).

Instead, she is prominent in the public sphere, even famous one could say, has a successful career, and is economically independent. She is considering marriage and a family in the way men do, as a possibility in the long run without any impact on her professional career. She has wealth, position and power. As Barbara Sarason notes, she is "sculpted into a role of educated paycheck-earning previously set aside for white males" (90). She travels for business displaying an independence considered by Morrison another masculine trait (Guthrie -Taylor, 27).

But her successful career is as a model, exploiting the market power of her young female body in the best tradition of patriarchal views of female bodies, by objectification. In her photo spreads the focus is repeatedly on her "wet and open lips" (TB, 116), foregrounding the way Jadine is packaged and marketed as the stereotypical tempting sex object.

Also, Morrison's insistence on Jadine's success in Paris, where European views of African American women have been historically shaped by Josephine Baker, who exploded on the Parisian stage dancing uninhibitedly a routine entitled "Danse Sauvage," and wearing nothing but a feather skirt, associates her with the exotic, hypersensual and hypersexual mythical black woman. According to Michel Fabre, the contemporary Paris of Tar Baby is a "social paradise in which a black woman is welcome and desired and loved, especially when she is fair-skinned and European looking" (289).

Jadine's ambivalent status keeps her well within the boundaries of the traditional tension between masculinization and the extreme feminization as hypereroticized beings black women have historically been subjected to, with the notable shift in the meaning of masculinization from back-breaking labor to money-earning power, an upgrade to middle-class mentality.

Morrison builds Son on ambivalence as well. As she herself as well her critics underline the way Son is type-cast from the very beginning as a criminal because of his physical appearance. Their first perception of him is shaped by the "wild, aggressive, vicious hair [dreadlocks] that needs to be put in jail" (TB, 113).

Therefore, it would follow, it is their prejudices about acceptable and unacceptable hairstyles and what they stand for that are highlighted in the process. Jadine, just like Margaret, Valerian's wife, is repulsed by Son and both women have the same reaction when they first see him in their bedrooms (on separate occasions); they immediately think he is a rapist, the black male stereotype.

The whites reveal their racial prejudices, the blacks reveal their class prejudices. Ondine and Sydney, the black domestic servants, who are proud of who they are: industrious and hardworking people, (Sydney especially taking pride in being "a genuine Philadelphia Negro mentioned in the book of that name" (TB, 284,) are both outraged when Valerian invites this bum to spend the night at the mansion. For different reasons they all feel superior and call him "a nigger in a woodpile" (TB, 82) and "gorilla" (TB, 129).

The utter arbitrariness of their prejudices is further driven home when Jadine sees Son after Valerian sent him to town to get some clothes and a haircut. He is a different man. "It was incredible what Hickey Freeman could do. Jadine was startled. In a white shirt unbuttoned at the cuffs and throat and with a gentle

homemade haircut, he was gorgeous" (TB, 156). At this point it seems that two conflicting sets of stereotypes, the dangerous black guy and the civilized "white" guy, crash to substantiate Morrison's complaint of "not being seen for what one is."

Only it turns out the inhabitants of the mansion are right on the money and then some. Son, or whatever his real name may be, because "[h]e'd had seven documented identities and before that a few undocumented ones, so he barely remembered his real original name himself" (TB, 139,) is not just any common criminal or rapist as everybody thought at first. He turns out to be a rapist and a violent, out-of-control man who killed his wife and had been a fugitive ever since. And this wasn't a one time event either, although Morrison's narrative suggests that the killing was an accident. He tries to control Jadine in a violent and aggressive manner in an effort to mold her into his idea of a black woman. While fighting, he dangles her out of the window by her arms so that the police come to investigate. In the infamous scene in which he tells her the Brer Rabbit story he rapes her. Jadine herself tells Ondine that "he beat her up some" (TB, 284).

In their encounter Jadine's and Son's ways of thinking prove incompatible. Jadine is proud of who she is and what she has accomplished. Her aunt even takes racial pride in her success. "My face wasn't in every magazine in Paris. Yours was. Prettiest thing I ever saw. Made those white girls disappear. Just disappear right off the page" (TB, 40). This is a valid point as it is a lot more difficult for a black model to make the cover of a magazine than for a white model mostly because of marketing reasons; fashion magazines mostly target the buying power of white women.

Most critics consider Jadine the obvious choice as the tar baby. Acquiring a French education in Paris she becomes convinced of the superiority of European culture and distances herself from her African heritage. Thus, she becomes the product of the white culture taking on its biases to the extent that she turns literally into its poster child. She likes "Ave Maria" more than gospel music, and Picasso more than an Itumba mask, and she experiences "racial" discomfort at what she perceives as the unfounded pretensions of black artists. There is a lot of racial bias that goes into this kind of labeling. A white person who values jazz and soul music, and African art and doesn't care much for classical music or

the impressionists would have all these options open for her and would be labeled open-minded instead of black and a traitor to his/her race as they should following this line of reasoning.

Jadine clearly challenges the logic of having her choices restricted by biology. But in the process she goes against at least two paramount precepts for black women. Claiming her individuality she goes against "I am we." She also breaks with the mission of black women as culture bearers. "Culture bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" (TB, 269) reads as an indictment in the novel.

Huey Newton argues that if you asked an African in ancient times who he was, according to an old African saying, he would reply "I am we," which he interprets as revolutionary suicide: "I, we, all of us are the one and the multitude" (375). Jadine's individualism, a Western trait, clashes with African communal values, making her a deviant. Instead of suppressing the individual for the benefit of the community, she suppresses the limitations of belonging to the black community to free her choices as a black individual.

Elaine Brown discusses suicide as a political form of resistance in the context of the Black Power

Movement. She traces it to the African insurrections and to "the first African who had leaped from slave ships in suicidal rejection of slavery" (*A Taste of Power*, 355). She also interprets suicide as a political form of resistance in Morrison's novels. Following her line of reasoning Jadine's behavior can be read as a more radical and certainly more effective political form of resistance in completely ignoring any system and any restrictions as to what she should be as a black woman and actually choosing to be white. If the past is reconstituted through bodies then Jadine is the genuine act of suicide.

In a defiant act of political resistance Jadine refuses labels and categorization; her goal is to be liberated of them all "to get out of my skin and be only the person inside-not American-not black--just me" (TB, 40). This act of personal liberation is not self-serving either, she applies it universally. In talking about Valerian her position is: "He's a person not a white man" (TB, 265). Her relationship with Son reveals her lack of social prejudices. He is clearly out of his league, but she doesn't seem bigoted, unless trying to help him climb the social ladder by acquiring an education and a well-paying job can be seen as prejudiced, a position Morrison's narrative seems to favor.

In constructing race, Karin Louisa Badt argues that Morrison follows the tradition of the Negritude movement of the 1930s and 40s that associates black bodies with nature and white bodies with culture. Representatives of the movement such as Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas underline the mystical and sensual relationship between black bodies and nature and the universe. This brand of "anti-racist racism," as Sartre later labeled it, was very influential with African American Civil Rights leaders and intellectuals (576).

The opposition nature/culture is at the crux of Morrison's construction of "authenticity" the way she uses it to differentiate Jadine from Son and the black woman in Paris. Jadine is labeled inauthentic because she rejects the "ancient properties" characterizing the other two.

The dream of hats Jadine has prior to encountering the black woman in Paris is relevant by contrast. Jadine is all hat, (and no cattle?) all packaging with fashion always associated with culture as opposed to the overwhelming realness of the black woman, all nature. "The vision itself is a woman too tall. Under her long canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too much bust" (TB, 45). It is interesting to note that

Jadine takes a completely masculine perspective in evaluating the black woman, focusing on the traditional body parts of male interest, a second nature maybe developed during the years of having to measure up herself to the standards of the fashion world.

The black woman is a world in herself, oblivious to her surroundings and unwilling to acknowledge them, adapt or compromise her ways. She insists on breaking rules, on imposing her terms. She insists on buying three eggs at the supermarket and is unimpressed by the fact that eggs are sold differently there. She intimidates the cashier. She walks tall and displays her undissimulated contempt for everything around her.

Morrison vouches for her authenticity. Her reading of the black woman is that "she is real, a complete individual who owns herself...who doesn't have to become anybody. Someone who already 'is.' ...She is the original self-the self that we betray when we lie, the one that is always there" (McKay, 404).

But the environment Morrison places her in, a supermarket in Paris, where she completely sticks out and attracts everybody's attention is also likely to frame her as the cliché of the strange and the exotic, and

thus turning her exactly into the stereotype Europeans think black women are.

Morrison's critics noted that her displacement called into question her authenticity. Rayson asks: "If the African woman in the yellow robe holding three eggs is authentic, why is she then in Paris?"(11) but then Rayson sees displacement in all the black characters from their place of origin, Africa, which I think is highly debatable. I do not believe that the black characters in Morrison's novel are displaced in America, or even Europe if they belong there, as most of them do.[31] It is the way the black woman clashes with her surroundings that foregrounds her exoticism, a fact that undermines any authenticity Morrison would like to read into this character.

Son is another problematic case of "authenticity," this time because of the implications he triggers. He proudly asserts: "I don't want to make it I want to be it" (TB, 266). If he is Morrison's authentic black man, then the authentic black man is again a stereotype: the white middle-class stereotype of the black rapist: an uneducated, criminal, unemployed loafer living on women he abuses, not only prone to criminal behavior, but in

his case a proven violent and dangerous criminal, a wife-beater and a wife-killer.

Son's racist contempt for white people and their world is conveniently selective. He doesn't seem to have a problem with living on Valerian's money when at his mansion and when he gets spiffed up for Christmas just as he doesn't have a problem living on Jadine's money, but when it comes to using Valerian's money to get an education his racial pride kicks in and he is profoundly offended. He screams: "I can do anything! Anything!"(TB, 232). His justification for not doing anything is that getting educated is too easy and would make him part of the system. He refuses to get an education that would allow him to make a living on racial grounds the way inner city black kids refuse to do well in school because it is a white thing threatening their racial identity and they would rather stand up for their race instead.

Son frames it as a refusal to submit his rebellious ways to the taming powers of civilization. Looking at the bathtub he is "smiling to think of what the leaden waves of the Atlantic had become in the hands of civilization. The triumph of ingenuity that had transferred the bored treachery of the sea into a playful gush of water that did exactly what it was told" (TB, 222).

Ultimately, it all boils down to whose perspective should prevail. Obviously Morrison's, since it is her novel, but some of her assumptions are problematic, not least of which her blunt rejection of gender oppression. "I think there is a serious question about black male and black female relationships in the twentieth century. I just think that the argument has always turned on something it should not turn on: gender. I think that the conflict of gender roles is a cultural illness" (Mckay, 404).

Another troubling part of the equation is that the distinction nature/culture that Morrison roots her construction of race in would support Son's view, making ignorance a black thing and being educated a white thing, although in an interview she argues that nobody "should apologize for being educated" (Wilson, 85ff).

Jadine's answer to Son's philosophy is: "Stop loving your ignorance-it isn't lovable" (TB, 227). She refuses to be a victim of his violence and leaves him with "his white-folks-black-folks primitivism "(TB, 265). She is proud "of having refused to be broken in the big ugly hands of any man" (TB, 275). She refuses to be assimilated just as she refuses to take up the feminine role of minding the pie table in the church basement.

The violent condemnation of Jadine's choices that starts with Morrison and is taken over by her critics ranging from "inauthentic" to "race traitor" is explained by Harris: "African American folk culture has not prepared us well for a female outlaw...Women who dare to assert individualistic values over communal ones are summarily put in their places. Men who follow individualistic paths are deemed heroic; that remains so even when they are consciously iconoclastic outlaws such as Stagolee" (Harris, 128).

The question remains: according to this position should black women not attempt to be successful white men? Is biology destiny? Should black women willingly submit to domestic violence? It looks like Jadine's act of political resistance to the old black woman stereotype amounts to racial suicide.

The novel is open ended. It begins with Jadine running away from a man in Paris and ends with her running away from another man back to Paris. At the beginning of the novel Son is kind of aimlessly roaming and at the end he is left in the fog aimlessly trying to find his way in pursuit of a woman who not only does not want him but isn't even there. In between, the characters intersect but no apparent evolution can be noted. Jadine

tries to change Son, but eventually gives up, carrying on with her choices that make her proud of who she is. Son tries to change Jadine, but eventually is left out in the cold. They do not appear changed in any significant way as a result of their encounter.

How can one apply the allegory of the tar baby Morrison claims to be essential for the reading of her novel, then? Who is the oppressor and who gets away with his/her wrong doings without being punished? One possible reading is both characters are looking for trouble, for the tar baby, when they decide to get themselves into such an unlikely affair, and then run away from it. Son is still chasing it at the end of the novel, though. Chandler Harris has a similar take on the story: " 'Did the fox eat the rabbit?' asked the little boy to whom the story had been told. "Dat's all de fur de tale goes,' replied the old man. 'He mout, end den agin he moutent. Some say Jedge B'ar come 'long en loosed im- some say he didn't.'"

But this doesn't seem to be what the author has in mind. It is a question of responsibility and choice. To make Jadine the tar baby and Son the victim as Morrison herself as well as many critics and do, one has to assume that Jadine's choices of being an independent, socially

and economically successful woman are wrong because they displace her from the world she belongs to and place her in an alien world and that she tries to persuade Son make the same mistake. Clearly this is Son's reading of what's going on. This reading, stuck in marginalizing binaries generative of exclusionary spaces, implies not only that race (actually the black race) prevails over the social and the economic but also groups education, and social and economic success with white culture and then vilifies it all, at least when attempted by a black woman like Jadine. This position is not just hard to defend but self-defeating too and Morrison's own personal choices clearly would not support it. If one is to apply her line of reasoning to her personal choices she would join Jadine as a sell-out to the white dominant culture since she chose to be part of an elitist educational system that would be equated in this novel with white values. In the end it all boils down to whose perspective should be given precedence and on what grounds, but the crux of the matter, and the part less satisfactorily supported by Morrison's position, is why it should be refused or inaccessible to some based on race alone.

II. 3. Sethe - The Body as Site of Political Contestation

Sethe, the main character of Morrison's novel Beloved, is a runaway slave in nineteenth century America. This type of character, the black slave woman, loving wife and mother, fighting hard to liberate herself and her family from the bondage of slavery at first sight seems pretty ordinary, unlike Morrison's previous outrageous feminine characters that seriously challenge the construction of femininity and their assigned place within the system by going against the socially accepted norms for gender roles, family, and motherhood. The outrageousness this time consists in the way this character sets out to reclaim herself and reappropriate her body, her children, her past history, and practically the world that marginalized and abused her.

According to Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, like other neo-slave narratives Beloved fills the need "to re-inscribe history from the point of view of the black woman, most specifically from the point of view of the nineteenth-century enslaved mother".[32] That is what the neo-slave narratives that flourished in American literature at the end of the 20th century aimed to accomplish. The 19th century real slave narratives did not accomplish that because they were misled into playing to a white audience

by protecting its sensitivities and following certain fashionable literary models.

Morrison explains their fakeness. "I wouldn't read them for information because I knew that they had to be authenticated by white patrons, that they couldn't say everything they wanted to say because they couldn't alienate their audience[...]. Their narratives had to be very understated. So while I looked at the documents and felt *familiar* with slavery and overwhelmed by it, I wanted it to be truly felt. I wanted to translate the historical into the personal"[33] (Schappel 103).

There is no question that a talented novelist like Morrison is the right person to translate the historical into the personal and to make slavery *felt*. But her legitimate criticism of the nineteenth century slave narratives applies equally to her novels, which have been equally validated by a white audience, as proven by the Nobel Prize for literature this novel won her. Slave narratives may be indebted to conventions popular at the time they were written, but how is Morrison's endeavor free of such conventions? How is her version more authoritative?

And how is Morrison, a twentieth century upper-class intellectual and well-established ivy-league academic better suited to convey more genuinely the black slave experience in a neo-slave narrative in the form of a postmodern novel? One would suspect this would give rise to conflicting authorial appropriations. Hutcheon's view of history in which she states that we "juxtapose what we think we know of the past (from official archival and personal memory)" with "the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge" as to "[w]hich 'facts' make it into history? And *whose* facts?" (Politics 71) basically highlights the fictionality of history that consists of arranged or rearranged bits and pieces that cannot make a legitimate claim as to their truthfulness. But then how is it that the nineteenth century narratives are not to be taken at face value, as Morrison convincingly argues, and hers or anyone else's can make a better claim of authenticity?

This is an important issue for the claims of the novel which deals at length with questions of authority, legitimacy, and possession. Morrison already touched upon the implications of who has the authority to define what an authentic black woman should be in Tar Baby. This

time Morrison contrasts perspectives with real ontological consequences. The novel dramatizes a multi-layered struggle over meaning, who has the power to enforce it, and the construction of subjectivity. Dominant norms as to who has the authority to define Sethe's body and who does it belong to are in turn affirmed and contested. Several people within the novel: Schoolteacher, Paul D, Beloved, Denver, and Sethe herself fight to appropriate it. Morrison deals with Sethe's body as a historical text, the way Maxine Hong Kingston does in The Woman Warrior and with a similar purpose: to re-inscribe women into history, in Morrison's case black slave women.

Schoolteacher's attempt to domesticate Sethe's body has, thus, wider historic implications. His heavy-handed approach when it comes to power relations is made clear by the way he not only claims a legal right to his property, (although legally she doesn't even belong to him as he has pretty much the status of a hired hand,) but a right to enforce the negative connotations of racial identity. He is equally physically and epistemologically destructive. It is no accident that the readers only know him as Schoolteacher, a rare generic

name associated with a white character in Morrison's novels, this time standing not for the feeling of anonymity and lack of belonging as generic names usually do when applied to black people, but instead raising him to the status of a whole class, he represents the reductive discourse of displacement that stereotypes slaves out of their subjectivity.

Charles Scruggs argues Schoolteacher's significance as "voice of law" and "perverse rationality" collating it with Galatians (3:23-25) where Paul says: "Now before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wheretofore the law was our schoolmaster... But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster."

Quite appropriately, then, the language of control and surveillance emerges in Schoolteacher's discourse. The "perverse rationality" Scruggs talks about makes Schoolteacher force reality into neat categories masquerading as a master narrative. After measuring Sethe's body he instructs his pupil to put Sethe's "human characteristics on the right; her animal ones on the left." For him, Sethe is "the one [who] made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked

besides having at least ten breeding years left" (B, 149). There is not a personalizing element directly related to Sethe in his definition of her. He defines her in terms of marketable skills and profits to be gained. His way of thinking also foregrounds the way the system worked with the slaves supporting it. It also evidences that Schoolteacher *thinks* in human and animal characteristics even when he is not making any lists for the purpose of documenting his property. The constant objectification together with the dehumanizing animal features justify and support the degradation inflicted by his power-wielding gaze. He claims the position of power for himself uncontested: "definitions belong to the definers-not the defined" (B, 190). It can also be read as a stab at Foucault's power/knowledge theory.

Shoolteacher's nephews "steal [Sethe's] milk" pretty much as they would an animal's and are reprimanded along the same lines for viciously beating Sethe afterwards by being asked to ponder: "what would his own horse do if he beat him beyond the point of education" (B, 149). The issues of Sethe being a woman, their elder, and a pregnant woman for that matter never come up in the conversation. It is a clear situation where her race

obliterates all her other traits making them invisible, therefore her body is dis-articulated. This kind of dismembering results in the epistemological death of the body.

The discourse to counteract this dis-articulation resulting in the degradation and ultimately the destruction of the body emerges only when the surveillance is gone, in the form of Baby Suggs's manifesto for repossessing the body. "Here,...in this place, we flesh; Flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it, love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it... Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them, touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face, 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, You! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth...You got to love it. That is flesh that I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance, backs that need support; shoulders that need strong arms...More than eyes and feet. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear em now, love your heart. For this is the prize" (B, 88-89).

The whole passage consists of a catalogue of *human* gestures and feelings the liberated slaves need to accustom themselves with while unlearning the history of abuse in order to reconstruct their bodies. It is like a manual for re-articulating or re-membering[34]/remembering their body. What Baby Suggs preaches Foucault calls "disqualified knowledges" suppressed "within the body of functionalist and systematizing theory" (Foucault, 81-2). It is a subversive discourse that fights to disrupt and overtake the dominant one as it aspires to the same status.

Morrison seems to have epistemological fun playing with and unsettling the received cultural values that constitute the existing order. Baby Suggs's manifesto for repossessing the body can also be read as a doctrine for the resurrection of the epistemologically defunct *body*[35] that parallels the well-established resurrection of the spirit paramount for Western cultures it mocks and subverts, also suggesting that before taking possession of the afterlife, some need to take possession of this life.

Morrison's subversive, unsettling postmodern rewrite of dominant received values is further developed in an

effort of reappropriating them by the alternative she proposes to the sacrosanct concept of the Holy Trinity. In her feminist version, an adjective Morrison would strongly dispute, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the all-male symbol of perfect love are reworked into the mother, the daughter, and the unholy spirit, the sobering symbol of imperfect love just as redeeming in a different order of things, generating a parallel universe of the disenfranchised.

The ex-slaves need a new catechism to aid them in defining themselves and that's what Baby Suggs attempts to work out because what they lack is knowledge to replace the dehumanizing experience and the brutalizing knowledge that re-enforces their inferiority. "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema" the "corporeal schema" because of "a historical-racial schema" "out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (Fanon, 110-111).

The characters in the novel struggle to construct their humanity and thus repossess their bodies. Paul D warns Sethe of the danger of internalizing the sense of inferiority - the definer's definition, insisting "[y]ou got two feet, Sethe, not four" (B, 165). In her struggle

to reappropriate her body she has to address fragmentariness and loss of boundaries, not knowing "where the world stopped and she began" (B, 165).

Sethe lacks the elementary knowledge as to her human potential arising from human relationships and human interaction that eluded her, elements which would coalesce into a sense of her own humanity and thus enable her to reconstruct her *human* body. It is an inherited lack as we can see her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, a slave woman of an older generation, suffering from the same debilitating affliction, wondering "Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me?" (B, 140).

The reappropriation of the body is all the more important since as Stuart Hall notes "[d]isplaced from a logocentric world where the mastery of cultural modes meant the mastery of writing...the people of the black diaspora have, in opposition to all that, found...the deep structure of their cultural life in...the body (What, 470).

Sethe's marked body is a space of resistance, a space of political battle against the power structures.[36] All bodies are marked by power, in this case literally. "We are all trying to leave our bodies behind" (B, 210). Sethe's body bears the scarring; it is inscribed by power as it literally left its mark on it in the form of the chokecherry tree. Her mother has a circle and a cross branded underneath her breast. Sethe has to complete the process of rediscovering, redefining, and identifying with her human body, before she can claim possession of it, that is reapprorpiate it. Beloved is a record of that rememory, with retelling as a form of survival, fulfilling the need to confront those "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (B, 199) in order to reclaim the reconstructed body.

It is the power of the unholy spirit that purges and resurrects her body. The past she is trying to run away from catches up with her in the form of Beloved returning from the dead. Sethe's forced corporealization is triggered by a ghost. For Sethe "every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable" (B, 58). In forcing her to be a mother to

her, Beloved forces her to confront her past and most of all to construct the reality of her being a human being and a woman. Her relationship with Beloved brings the emphasis entirely on her face. The most personalizing feature of the human body, unique to every individual, Sethe's face did not exist when Schoolteacher listed her human and animal traits. It is her confrontation with Beloved that forces her to reconstruct the reality of her face. Face as opposed to back, sex, arms which used to be the focus in Schoolteacher's master narrative when it comes to Black women. He is the dehumanizing factor, the one who "punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight" (B, 9).

Sethe's face had a short fleeting moment when it almost comes into focus when she wished she had been married by a priest and maybe have a wedding like a human being, though even her good Mrs. Garner was touched by how out of place her wish was and gave her a pair of earrings she never wore as long as she had no face, till she had got away from the bondage of slavery. Her "honeymoon" in the cornfield brings back the animal status. Quite appropriately Sethe's only piece of jewelry

are her earrings that highlight the face. And the crystal earrings turn into diamonds in Beloved's version, the catalyst of change. But the earrings are long gone when Beloved brings them up. It is only that moment of humanity in Sethe's life that's brought back by Beloved's asking about the earrings.

And since the past is reconstituted through bodies, it is the past that Sethe ultimately attempts to change. She can only complete the process after confronting all the meaningful events and people that shape her into the person she has become but also only after the whole community matures to a certain level of awareness and recognition so that they can acknowledge her, and not before. The alternative epistemological discourse has to be powerful and ubiquitous enough to record the reconfiguring.

What is outrageous about Sethe's character is her monstrous potential of motherly love. While Sula and Jadine go against the well-established values of femininity and motherhood they contest, Sethe on the other hand enhances the norms of motherly love to monstrous proportions. Her body containing the monstrous motherly love has a monstrous dimension itself inscribed

in it by the monstrous experiences it was subjected to and the permanent mark of the monstrous scarring. If reality is a function of discourse, Sethe's body is a function of the monstrosity generating it. It is the discrepancy between the dominant norms that shape expectations and their epistemological displacement that create the perception of monstrosity. The frequent uncanny associations with animal features together with the sense of inhuman indignities pervade Sethe's body with a sense of freakishness. It is not a woman's body due to the mythical resources of survival it displays, its strength, resolve, and potential for enduring torture and suffering, although it belongs to a woman.

Sethe is by no means singular among Morrison's characters. The monstrous potential of motherly love was addressed by Morrison's novels before Beloved. Eva Peace, in Sula, mutilates her body for the survival of her children. She also kills her son Plum out of love, to save him from his demons.

There are historical precedents to consider, too. Barbara Christian documents that "some slave women were so disturbed by the prospect of bearing children who could only be slaves that they did whatever they could to

remain childless" (220). In the novel, Sethe's mother killed all her babies conceived by rape on the slave ship and by white men afterwards. She did not kill Sethe because she was a child of love.

The chaotic randomness and total lack of control over their displacement as experienced by the characters of the novel alone would grant an enhanced degree of intensity: "Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized...What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children" (B, 23).

As Hortense Spillers notes, the ownership of children under slavery displaced the natural order: "Under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the Mother, nor is s/he related to the 'owner,' though the latter 'possesses' it" (74).

Killing her children, or at least attempting to, Sethe claims her right of ownership as a mother to her children and nullifies the claim of Schoolteacher. It is

the only way she can have control over their bodies. Therefore, when she realizes the danger they are in she snatches them away from Schoolteacher. "She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe" (B, 163).

Sethe escapes the role of victim assigned to her and successfully defends her rights of ownership to her own body and to the bodies of her children through a love of monstrous proportions. It is to be noted that proportion is the issue here, what would be a proportionate, an adequate response. And under the circumstances Sethe's excessive love for her children is the only balanced response in a world of excesses. The subversive heroine with her monstrous love disrupts both the ontological and the epistemological discourse to re-inscribe her rights of ownership that reverse the established order.

## Part III. The Misrepresentation of History

Unlike Erdrich, for Kingston and Tan, just like for Morrison, race is always a factor. There is no escaping it. In this chapter I will look into the construction of femininity by two authors who came to be considered classic Chinese American writers: Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, the most prominent names that made Chinese American fiction popular in the U.S. I will consider their first successful novels: Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts and Tan's The Joy Luck Club.

Chinese American women find themselves in a slightly different position from Native American and African American women. Besides gender and race oppression as first-and second-generation immigrants, they are confronted with what they perceive as a sharper rejection by mainstream America. The process of rejection and isolation presented in the novels highlights the way discrimination works against ethnic groups and races. The language barrier is a lot more significant in their case, although language is only one mark of cultural identity, and there are other powerful cultural barriers that foster discrimination in all cases.

In discussing divergent cultural influences, Kingston makes the point that the bits and pieces of history, mythology, and customs one acquires, and which combine into a coherent or at least more or less functional personal outlook, are hard to trace back to their origin or categorize as to their authenticity, reliability, or overall value because they are random, chaotic, and accidental. The varying end result is what matters and the perspective that particular individual takes in considering it all. As Kingston says, "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (WW, 5-6). Two conflicting cultural expectations shape and hinder at the same time the Chinese American woman's search for identity: twentieth-century America and the heritage of imperial China. I will first trace the Chinese influences.

### III. 1. The Persistence of Memory Loss

Chinese American women have to cope with an egregious heritage of gender discrimination and oppression. Chinese culture for centuries viewed women as

sex objects for male gratification. They were restricted to subordinate roles in a system of multiple oppressions.[1] They were a non-existent issue in the power play.

In its millennia-long history, clearly laws and practices change dramatically in China, but there are some constants. The perspective I take in considering the position of women in Chinese society is a Western perspective not only because it is the only one available to me, but more importantly because for the purpose of analyzing the cultural clash of first-generation Chinese American women, it is the perspective I need because it is the perspective they adopted. My emphasis will thus focus on the features of Chinese culture that clash with Western beliefs and practices.

The basic unit of Chinese society is the family. "Confucianism, including classical and Han Confucianism, provided a view of the cosmos and social order that legitimated the Chinese patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal family system" (Ebrey 2003: 11). Women's prospects in traditional times were extremely bleak. Neo-Confucianism emphasized the practices of segregation and seclusion of women. Infanticide, greatly influenced by Neo-Confucianism that "denied women basic human rights,

including the right to live" existed throughout Chinese history (Yao 1983: 91). Its modern counterpart is the practice of aborting female fetuses in Communist China, rightly or wrongly blamed on the Chinese policy meant to keep under control the explosion of population by drastically limiting the number of children a family can have to two, or one son.

In a very rigid male-dominated system that at its best ignored women and at worst demeaned and oppressed them, women had no place except the domestic realm subordinated to their fathers, husbands, and even their sons.[2] "Throughout her life, the ideal woman was subject to her father as a child, her husband when married, and her sons when widowed, and she was taught the four "virtues:" first, a woman should know her place in the universe and behave in compliance with the *natural* [my italics] order of things; second, she should guard her words and not chatter too much or bore others; third, she must be clean and adorn herself to please men; and fourth, she should not shrink from her household duties" (Okihiro, 69)

Outside the family, the only social position available for a woman was as a prostitute, or entertainer, which was almost the same. Confined to the

family circle their only option was marriage, and an arranged marriage for that matter.

Confucius, the dominant influence for most of Chinese culture, doesn't seem to think much of women. He has one statement about marriage in his *Analects*: "Women and small men are the most difficult to keep: if you stay close to them they become insolent; if you keep them at a distance, they are resentful" (17.25). This sample of rampant misogyny may display his frustration, as tradition has it his own marriage wasn't a success,[3] but the fact remains that his lack of teaching about the duties of a husband certainly contributed to the position women held in the order of things.

There is a rigid structure of family rituals in Chinese culture expressing power and status. Chu His's "Family Rituals"[4] is the standard authoritative text on ritual matters in imperial China. The rituals convey the neat conformity to the social order that Confucianism strove to establish, and prescribe a rigid conduct of social life in relation to traditions and obligations, as acts of class differentiation meant to institute a cultural cohesion that didn't exist within the enormous boundaries of China.

In its millennia-long history China had only one woman sovereign, Empress Wu Tze-t'ien (625-705 AD). Women in power were considered unnatural and went against Confucian beliefs. Empress Wu was of low social status and emerged at court as a fifth-grade concubine. Later she usurped the T'ang throne and ruled for twenty years under a dynasty of her own creation called Chou. During her reign women in China enjoyed freedom.

Girls had little access to formal education in traditional China. They were mostly prepared to play their role within the family and, therefore, trained to perform well their duties within the household: cooking, weaving, embroidery, and taking care of family members. Being well trained in the domestic chores they had to perform increased a girl's value on the marriage market and, therefore, was considered an asset in arranging a marriage. Although the amount of freedom and education varied depending on the dynasty they lived under and the philosophies and laws favored at the time, formal education was never considered for girls. There were times though, like before the Song dynasty, when girls from wealthy families were well educated and could even play outdoor sports, such as polo, a serious

transgression under traditional Chinese views on women that confined them to the domestic sphere.

Pan Chao's *Admonitions for Women* is considered the classic text and has been used ever since the Han dynasty for the education of girls. It is a book aimed at instructing girls on how to fulfill the feminine ideal defined in the terms of Confucian ethical norms. It was meant to be read by women, and it consists of a prescription of norms regulating feminine behavior according to the role Confucian society saw fit for them.

According to the *Admonitions*, humility is the main feminine virtue women have to master and to demonstrate within the institution of marriage. Three chapters of the book deal specifically with the norms regulating a wife's relation to her husband and his family, since Chinese women after marriage moved in and lived with their husbands' families. The assumption is that women find their place in the world through marriage; therefore, unquestionably marriage was women's main goal in life. Without a chance to marry, women were deprived of the means for finding their place in life. This was a real issue as impoverished families unable to provide the dowry had to sell their daughters to be concubines and prostitutes.

After marriage, always arranged, chastity then fidelity were the virtues required to govern a wife's relationship to her husband. Women had to show their devotion to their husband by active support and eternal conjugal fidelity, even after the husband's death. Cheng Yi's statement that "To starve to death is a small matter, but to lose one's chastity is a great matter" is just "one of the many aphorisms used to indoctrinate young women." "Often a woman who found herself disgraced was impelled to commit suicide in order to redeem her good name and that of her family" (Ng, 60). Men, on the other hand, could have in traditional China as many concubines as they could afford. Concubines were recognized sexual partners, belonged to the men's households, and were expected to bear their children.

As Frederick Brandauer points out, "[b]asic to Pan Chao's views was the idea that the relationship reflects the dual cosmic forces of yin and yang; husband and wife should complement one another, and together ideally should reflect the harmony of the entire universe."[5] It is clear that this ideal is rooted in the assumption of complementary sex roles. Prompted by the different nature of the two, each has a different purpose; therefore, the different nature of sex roles excludes the possibility,

or need for that matter, of institutionalized competition like access to the same type education for example. It is obvious that the Confucian ideal of womanhood based on complementary sex roles also excludes any idea of gender equality. Although it appears that the cosmological foundations were construed as equal and complementary, they clearly elicit hierarchical interpretations. The entire Confucian system legitimizes hierarchy as the natural order of things. In the Confucian view of a harmonious universe, there is no doubt that the heavens rule over the earth.

The third fundamental virtue in the Confucian system is filial piety. In the "Hiao-king," Confucius's book on filial piety, he considers it the root of all virtue. It generally implied the obligation one had to love and respect one's parents, honor them and contribute to their well being by becoming successful in life. It also included the obligation of the son to live with his parents even after marriage together with his wife, and he owed them obedience for as long as he lived. The will of the parents was supreme. A son could be obliged to divorce his wife if she failed to please his parents.

As for a woman, filial piety is an obligation toward her family, as well as her husband's family. Filial piety

and obedience were prerequisites of the ideal relationship to parents-in-law. Pan Chaos's *Admonitions* prescribes: "Let a woman not act contrary to the wishes and the opinions of parents-in-law about right and wrong; nor let her dispute with them what is straight and what is crooked" (88).[6]

Thus, in a state sponsored system that went out of its way to implement strict conformity to social order through obedience to authority, loyalty to superiors, respect for elders, and rigid family relations, women find themselves at the bottom of the pyramid. The system oppressed and utterly repressed women who were silenced into enduring their "fate" in the order of things without complaining.

The gender discrimination and oppression Chinese women have been subjected to for centuries is not just ancient history, unfortunately, and they have long-lasting effects both on the women and the culture to this day. This is true even for Chinese American women.

Just one instance that clearly shows the perpetuation of the old mentality is domestic violence. While discrimination and violence against women are universal and strike in all cultures and classes, the way they are perceived and dealt with are not. According to the

National Association of Social Workers (the New York Chapter meeting in December 2000),[7] Asian women are still reluctant to break their silence about the crimes committed against them. On top of the tremendous shame the women feel at being abused by their spouses, which makes them ambivalent about reporting it, they are blamed for disgracing their family if they do. The social workers underlined the cultural pressure Chinese women face not to reveal domestic violence. Within their community women who speak are considered deviant and held accountable to prove their abuse. One social worker, Ms. Tripathi, noted "for women, their experience is of being victimized twice; first by their abuser and then by the community that does not validate their experience."

This situation is not very different from the laws and practices regulating crimes against women in traditional China-rape for example[8]-which made it very difficult for women to prove that they were rape victims as the burden of proof rested primarily on them. In the U.S. justice system, which holds everyone innocent until proven guilty, the burden of proof rests heavily on the victim too, but there is a network of institutions like the police, prosecutors, medical personnel, and social workers that support the victim. More importantly though,

public opinion weights heavily on the side of the victim because sexual crimes against women are considered especially heinous and the perpetrators a social danger not to be taken lightly.

The social workers also noted that men's attitudes had a destructive impact on women's self-esteem. This was particularly emphasized by social workers who run a support group for battered women attended by Chinese women. They note that three out of five women show dangerously low self-esteem as a result of constant verbal abuse by men who look down on them.

### III.2. Writing Women into History

Maxine Hong Kingston is the first American born child to Chinese immigrant parents. Born and raised in California, she is a Berkeley graduate and her first book, The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, took the literary scene by surprise in 1976. A best-seller, controversial and intriguing, attacked for propagating Orientalism and cultural stereotypes, it won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

The accusations of Orientalism are debatable. If taking a Western perspective is intrinsically bad, then cultural issues should only be dealt with from inside that particular culture; a very limiting view. Moreover,

Kingston's purpose in this novel is not to educate, but instead to dramatize the American daughters' response to a Chinese heritage they are estranged from. The American daughters of Chinese immigrants she discusses know about Chinese ways about as much as Kingston's readers. One can argue that Kingston doesn't feel the need to explain everything Chinese to her readers and thus, keeps the mystery surrounding China. But her character, Brave Orchid, does not explain her stories in keeping with traditional Chinese education.

Kingston is a very outspoken contemporary feminist writer particularly concerned with the sufferings and misery Chinese women are forced to undergo by a misogynistic society and the injustices done to them by the patriarchal system.

Yuan Yuan argues that "[t]he 'China experiences' presented by Kingston and Tan emerge as narratives of recollection--which means that in their novels they have reconstructed various narratives of experiences in China against the background of American society and within the context of American culture. Their China narratives emerge in the "other" cultural context informed by a complex process of translation, translocation, and

transfiguration of the original experiences in China" (p. 292).

In her novel, she recreates her own version of Mulan as a woman warrior by contrasting her to "no name woman," the only other traditional Chinese female figure in her novel, thus highlighting the frustrations and disappointment Chinese women felt with their status of being left out of society, always outside looking in, as well as all the limitations of the condition they fantasized being rid of.[9] A non-factor in social life and consequently in Chinese history, women strive to make their existence acknowledged. Excluded, discriminated against, and denied their basic human right to exist on grounds that they are lesser human beings and therefore incapable of the glorious deeds reserved for men and consequently, undeserving of the honor and respect reserved for men, Chinese women have a place in the order of things outside the boundaries of history. Naturally, they want to prove themselves.

Kingston begins her novel by recuperating and empowering the discourse of a nameless aunt silenced into oblivion. In doing so she creates a matrilineal line to counteract traditional patrilineage very much the same way as Tan does in *The Joy Luck Club*. All the main

characters in both novels are women, with men taking a back seat as secondary characters.

There are several versions of the story of Mulan. The traditional Chinese heroine originates in an anonymous poem from the time of the Northern Dynasties (420-589 A.D.) and was collected in the Song (960-1279 A.D.) anthology of lyrics, songs and poems *Yuefu*. The poem tells the story of Mulan, the legendary heroine, who took her father's place in the draft of the Khan, fought the invaders courageously, and returned home triumphant. Her comrades did not know the warrior was a woman during all the years on the battlefield, and were totally shocked when back at her village she finally appeared as a woman. Even before the Song anthology, it circulated in oral form for centuries. The 1998 Disney film *Mulan* is probably the best-known version and therefore the most influential with American audiences. Through her creative handling of the myth, Kingston creates a heroine who transgresses traditional gender boundaries and challenges patriarchy. The values and concerns Kingston expresses in constructing the identity of Mulan are relevant as to her feminist position. Tan and Kingston, like Erdrich and Morrison, are particularly interested in the construction of female identity.

Wearing men's clothes and armor and going to war opens up the world for Mulan. She has the possibility to act, to participate fully in a social environment and be acknowledged for her accomplishments in the way only men could, to prove herself as worthy of respect and honor as any man and, finally, she violates the taboo: she leads men in battle. She clearly wants the status of a man and the possibilities open to a man, but does that mean that she wants *to be* a man? Is she driven by the penis envy feminists have been accused of before?

Mulan knows exactly the cost of her endeavor. She knows the danger she puts herself in and willingly takes the risk. She knows that for her it is not enough to prove herself as good as any man by fighting bravely in battle and staying alive, that she will have to prove to be a lot better, and on top of the battle skills she will have to outsmart friend and foe in order to conceal her identity. Basically it's Mulan against the whole world, pretty much the way things used to be for Chinese women when they dared question their oppression and step out of line. Thus, while building a fictional body for herself, while taking the ultimate challenge and becoming a man, she must hide her gender. She is aware that "Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or

students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations" (WW, 39). This makes it clear that it was not a matter of personal ability or failure that kept women out of the social life-it was flat out misogyny.

Kingston deconstructs the body of knowledge upon which the relations of power are built by showing Mulan able to accomplish all her glorious deeds only after undergoing many years of being taught, trained, and tested, which actually highlights the main differences between men and women in the Chinese social system: education and opportunity.

When she returns to her village after the fifteen years of training, her parents "killed a chicken and steamed it whole, as if they were welcoming home a *son* [my italics] " (WW, 34). Although her parents are happy to see her back to take her father's place in the draft and aware of her accomplishments that make her as good as a *son* and, therefore, honor her accordingly, the rest of her family and the village think within the expected social parameters. A giggling cousin tells her: "[s]ome say you went to the city and became a prostitute"(WW, 34), the only option available to a girl who left the

protective family environment to venture out into the world on her own.

Mulan leaves her village to go to war as leader of a small army, as "families who had hidden their son during the last conscription volunteered them to [her]" (WW, 36). She is more of a man than all of them, even after her army's fame spread far and wide and millions joined it. "When we had to impress other armies-marauders, columns of refugees filing past one another, boy gangs following their martial arts teachers-[she] mounted and rode in front.... Then screaming a mighty scream and swinging two swords over [her] head [she] charged the leaders" (WW, 37).

She is an action figure, the complete opposite of the female stereotype she is running away from and straight into on her war path: "women, cowering, whimpering women. I heard shrill insect noises and scurrying. They blinked weakly at me like pheasants that have been raised in the dark for soft meat. The servants who walked the ladies abandoned them and they could not escape on their little bound feet. Some crawled away from me, using their elbows to pull themselves along. These women would not be good for anything. I called the villagers to come identify any daughters they wanted to take home, but no one claimed

any...They wandered away like ghosts" (WW, 44). This is a scathing indictment of the status of traditional women. Human beings, crawling on all fours, reduced to reacting like defenseless animals for slaughter and even lower than that in status, completely useless and unwanted; definitely not human, just ghosts.

On the other hand, the events here suggest that masculinity, just like femininity, is socially constructed; it is something that can be learned and imitated. Those women were made into the miserable, pitiful creatures they are. To a certain extent Mulan, too, is trained into the mechanisms of self-repression and self-denial so ubiquitous with Chinese women. She knows how to take a hold of herself and inhibit her natural impulses. "I could feel a wooden door inside of me close. I had learned on the farm that I could stop loving animals raised for slaughter. And I could start loving them immediately when someone said, 'This one is a pet,' freeing me and opening the door" (WW, 33). Even Mulan, the transgressor, can't escape being conditioned by authority and following blindly rules regulating her behavior, which in her case can also be blamed on her training in martial arts that inculcate discipline and self-control.

After winning countless battles and covering herself with glory on the battlefield, Mulan eventually vanquishes all the enemies, emperor included, and returns home to face her last battle: the local baron. She wants to punish him for all his crimes, but when it comes to crimes they face a gender divide. He seems mystified as to what crimes Mulan accuses him of: "Oh, come on now. Everybody takes the girls when they can. The families are glad to be rid of them. 'Girls are maggots in the rice.' 'It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.' I haven't done anything other men-even you-wouldn't have done in my place" (WW, 43). He sees no personal fault in being part of the system. The fact that none of the villagers claim any of the girls who were their daughters proves his point. Treating the women as he did was not a crime he committed that he should be held personally responsible for; it is just the way things were. The only justification Mulan has in killing him is fighting the establishment.

Kingston presents us with a very different version than the legend's or the film's episodes of the confrontations both with the emperor and with the local baron. Both episodes help develop a radical, anti-establishment stance. Robert G. Lee observes that "for

Kingston, myths, necessarily rebuilt, have a strategic value in helping to analyze contemporary events. She recognizes that the power of myth resides in its capacity to be recontextualized and inscribed with new meanings" (59). In Kingston's mythmaking Mulan is not only a warrior, she is a general leading *men* in battle. She is not just going to war to fight for the emperor; she is leading a peasant uprising to rid the country of its corrupt government oppressing the people. The confrontation with the emperor and the local baron, symbols of the repressive regime, becomes a matter of personal revenge: "We faced our emperor personally. We beheaded him, cleaned out the palace, and inaugurated the peasant who would begin the new order" (WW, 42). The changes definitely make the story more democratic and even more American for that matter.

Although Mulan possesses all the attributes of a male warrior-courage, loyalty, and integrity-she never turns into a man except for the appearances absolutely necessary to accomplish her mission. She never acquires a masculine way of thinking. In fact, she is very much a female version of a warrior at all times. She only wants to assert her existence in the one way possible in those times.

The 1998 Disney version emphasizes Mulan's femininity by insisting on her being smaller and less powerful than her opponents and thus, perpetuating the gender stereotype. It also taps into the eternal David and Goliah myth meant to elicit an emotional response from the audience and manipulate their allegiance. She triumphs by being resourceful and out-thinking men. The changes highlight the American ideal of femininity that needs to be salvaged at all costs.

Kingston, too, goes to great length to emphasize the idea of Mulan's femininity, but takes a more feminist position. Her version of the woman warrior never quite turns into a male warrior who enjoys victory and domination over the enemy or the actual killing. Mulan has a fundamentally different philosophical approach to the idea of war, a much more "motherly" view placing events in the larger perspective. She is a woman, she thinks like a woman, and Kingston goes to great length to emphasize this throughout the novel. "I bled and thought about the people to be killed; I bled and thought about the people to be born" (WW, 33). The fundamental difference here is that she can give life, not just take it away and consequently has a different kind of understanding and respect for it. She fights a feminine

kind of warfare. As opposed to the chaos, destruction, and human suffering that usually accompany war, "[her] army did not rape, only taking food where there was an abundance. [They] brought order everywhere [they] went" (WW, 37).

The only way in which she is like a man is the necessary appearance that grants her a chance to act. Not only doesn't Mulan try to change her feminine side, she rejoices in it. While at war she fulfills her dream and becomes a wife to the man she loved all her life. They live and fight together, "my husband and I, soldiers together just as when we were little soldiers playing in the village. We rode side by side into battle" (WW, 39). This is probably the most subversive attack on Chinese customs, the fantasy of equality inside the institution of marriage. In fact, while there seems to be equality within the marriage Mulan has a privileged position as a general and head of the army.

She even gives birth to a baby whom she takes with her in battle. "We made a sling for the baby inside my big armor, and rode back into the thickest part of the fighting" (WW, 40).

So, not only doesn't Mulan repress her femininity to try and become more fit for the part, she completely

embraces it. She also seems to know her place as a woman. After she's done fighting, she joins her husband's family honoring her traditional obligations. "Wearing my black embroidered wedding coat, I knelt at my parents-in-law's feet, as I would have done as a bride" (WW, 45).

This whole story in the context of the place of women in Chinese society seems like wishful thinking, a feminist fantasy meant to channel frustrations by escaping to never-never land. Even in twenty-first century United States, there is still dissent about women in combat units, although they are allowed to join the military. In traditional China, with footbinding crippling them and the system oppressing and indoctrinating them into a kind of insect-women totally dependent on men, how could women stand a chance to rise to such a position of taking power in their own hands?

The historic fact is that there were women warriors in Chinese history that fought the establishment. Such an example is the Taiping rebellion (1851-64) led by Sanniang Su, which begun in Guangxi and Guangdong provinces, when women demanded gender equality and an end to Confucian ethics, footbinding, and polygamy. Even more surprisingly, the women warriors were fierce and fought just as bravely as men would. In a Qing official's own

words: "After the capture of the city, all the Guangxi women should be executed. Absolutely no leniency or mercy should be shown them. For they have been just as courageous and fierce as male soldiers in defending the city."[10]

By foregrounding the story of Mulan, the exemplary woman who performs equally successfully in public and private life and manages to successfully balance her roles as a warrior at the top of the public sphere, which is entirely dominated by men, and in the private sphere of home as a dutiful daughter, wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, Kingston has imagined a victory over both the androcentric Chinese and Chinese American traditions.

### III.3. Re-Negotiating History

Kingston's gender construction is very similar to Erdrich's. As with Erdrich, for Kingston gender is fluid and even reversible. Mulan, like Father Damien, can shift modes and be a man on the battlefield and then a woman again with her husband and son after she's done fighting. This would imply that for Kingston too, gender construction is mostly role-play. Of particular importance for the history of female oppression is the way both writers view masculinity as the lifting of all

sanctions, restrictions, and limitations that force women into socially acceptable gender roles by severely crippling their chances to perform in a social environment. This approach to gender is very similar to Morrison's construction of Jadine, too, with the only difference that with Morrison all things take a racial overtone. The well educated in the ways of the dominant culture, the economically and socially successful and even famous Jadine who breaks the class, race, and gender glass ceilings is perceived not just as male but also as white.

The critique of patriarchal gender construction displayed by these women writers strongly supports Bourdieu's point about the social construction of the biological: "The biological appearances and the very real effects that have been produced in bodies and minds by a long collective labour of socialization of the biological and the biologicization of the social combine to reverse the relationship between causes and effects and to make a naturalized social construction appear as the grounding in nature of the arbitrary division that underlies both reality and the representation of reality" (MD, 3).

Kingston is fighting her own war against the establishment and taking her revenge by reporting the

crimes of sexism and racism. She proudly asserts "[t] he swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar....What we have in common are the words at our backs. The ideographs for *revenge* are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.' The reporting is the vengeance - not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words" (WW, 53). That's why, in Kingston's view, Kuan Kung is the god of war and literature, embracing both her fight and the woman warrior's under his protection. Reporting, making their plight known and their existence acknowledged, is the fight both Chinese and Chinese American women, just like Asian American women on the whole and, in fact, women in general, are fighting for authorial control in the field of gender and identity politics.

Chinese women prepared to live in the world they were faced with, to play their part in it fully aware of the injustices and the suffering they had to be subjected to, passing on that knowledge in an underground system of mostly passive resistance. Talking about her mother, Kingston gives us a sample of how this works: "She said I would grow up a wife and slave, but she taught me the song of the woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan" (WW, 140).

As Gary Okihiro notes in *Margins and Mainstreams* "Asian American history is replete with the deeds of men.

Women constitute a forgotten factor in Asian American history. The have "no name" (65).[11] Writing women into history against the grain of a millennia-long culture dominated by an ossified ethical, social, and political order that assigned and reassigned the qualities of masculinity and femininity always to the effect of pushing women outside the boundaries of history is what both Kingston and Tan set out to accomplish in their own way. They fight their wars by telling the story of Chinese American women and exposing networks and mechanisms of domestication that habitually normalized women's roles, repressing and silencing them The first thing Kingston's mother makes sure of when passing on her aunt's story to her is hide her transgression, try to keep a semblance of propriety and silence. "Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her" (WW, 5).

By recuperating the story of her aunt silenced into oblivion by the cultural coding of gender differences, which is never a disinterested or an accidental exercise, Kingston acknowledges the multiple silent subversive acts of feminine resistance that built up an alternative parallel structure to the official one, and which she derives her heritage from. The story she tells is that of her aunt forced to commit suicide after giving birth to a

baby girl not that of her husband who had immigrated to the United States. Individual expression being severely sanctioned, like any deviation from the norms, the family house is raided by a mob of angry, out of control villagers, who throw mud and rocks at the house, slaughter the farm animals, break in and smear blood everywhere, and smash to pieces everything inside. The villagers look for the unmentionable woman "ripped up her clothes and shoes and broke her combs, grinding them underfoot" (WW, 4). Whether she was guilty of being raped or of falling short of the ideal of female chastity, which clearly barred women from having sexual relations outside the marriage even after their husband's death, she has to be eliminated for defying the system. "The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them" (WW, 13).

In telling the story of her aunt, Kingston subverts the social relations of patriarchy and deconstructs the body of knowledge upon which power relations are built. "Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well" (WW, 5). She is eliminated because she is the living proof that male dominance can be defied so she has to join the "no name women" of Asian

American history. "The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her. Her betrayal so maddened them, that they saw to it that she would suffer forever, even after death. Always hungry, always needing, she would have to beg food from other ghosts, snatch and steal it from those whose living descendants give them gifts. She would have to fight the ghosts massed at crossroads for the buns a few thoughtful citizens leave to decoy her away from village and home so that the ancestral spirits could feast unharassed" (WW, 16). Aborted from the social order and ostracized in all worlds, annihilated by the power system she challenges, the "no name woman" is erased from collective memory. This way what happened, never happened. History is conveniently reshaped.

But the "no name woman" defies exclusion. The moment Kingston mentions her as "my aunt" in another act of resistance, she is no longer outside the system, she belongs, she will not be forgotten. Kingston, just like Morrison with Beloved, makes sure that this is a story to pass on, and she does just that. But before her, the story has already passed from mother to daughter in countless acts of unknown individual resistance whose

stories must be told. The underground network of resistance to male domination, the story of the "no name women" will be told. Kingston has the power of the warrior woman to write history. Failure to do so would amount to annihilation.

### III.4. Resisting Erasure

Failure to acknowledge and pass on the individual stories of women's struggle threatens the continuity of the network of resistance. That is why when Jing-mei Woo in *Joy Luck Club* (1989) voices her doubts that she knew her recently diceased mother well enough to tell her story, that is, to give voice to her suffering and make it known, the other members of the club react in horror, fearing their daughters, too, might lack the knowledge of their lives and their stories will be lost this time due to the generational and cultural gap that divides them from their American daughters. "The aunties are looking at me as if I had become crazy right before their eyes…. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truth and hopes they have brought to America" (JLC, 40). Amy Tan exploded on the literary scene with this novel that passes on the torch of articulating memory. It made the best sellers list, was nominated for the National Book

Award and the National Book Critics Award, and firmly placed her within the network of rememory.

Unmindful, in their American way, of the Chinese women's plight and fight not to be left out, the daughters raised American have to overcome more than just the generational gap in order to fill in the links and pass on their mothers' stories, thus validating their existence. In a way, this is a female parallel subversive structure meant to make up for the official misogynistic position that only validates male ancestry. In traditional Chinese culture only a son "could perform the ancestral rites and therefore guarantee his [father's] spiritual eternity" (JLC, 235). Left out of the official lineage and history, the women insure their spiritual eternity passing on their stories to their daughters. This perpetuates their ancestral lines deliberately erased by the official structure and insulates them against being silenced into oblivion for all times.

But in order for their history to pass on they rely on their daughters and the problem for the Chinese immigrants is the cultural gap they have to bridge in order to validate their existence. Their daughters do not understand the Chinese way. There is a fundamental clash between the American cult of the individual and the

traditional position Chinese women had, trained to deny their existence and fade into the background. The untrained eye, mindless of the Chinese ways might miss them. This is Ying-Ying St. Clair's anguish, " because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me...[a]ll these years I kept my nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me." And the consequences are dire. The link is broken. They are cut off from the matrilineage, and will be obliterated. "We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others" (JLC, 67).

The Chinese virtue of filial piety is meaningless to the American daughters, but genetics can't be denied. It is a special kind of socio-genetics that insures matrilineage by cutting to the essence of feminine oppression. "This is how a daughter honors her mother. It is *shou* so deep it is in your bones. The pain of the flesh is nothing. The pain you must forget. Because sometimes this is the only way to remember what is in your bones. You must peel off your skin, and that of your mother, and her mother before her. Until there is nothing. No scar, no skin, no flesh" ( JLC, 48).

Amy Tan's novel paints a very similar picture of the female gender to that of imperial China. Although raised to believe in their worthlessness, in their struggle for recognition, occasionally, Chinese girls, like Lindo Jong in *Joy Luck Club*, sometimes rebel in the misconception that individual accomplishment can supersede gender doom. "No, it's not true what some Chinese say about girl babies being worthless. It depends on what kind of girl baby you are. In my case people could see my value. I looked and smelled like a precious buncake, sweet with a good clean color" (JLC, 50). It is the manifestation of internalized oppression that leads the oppressed to believe that the treatment they get they deserve, and if only they were better they would have a better fate. The dominant discourse Lindo is rebelling against determines the limits of her rebellion by driving her to construe her worth in terms of appealing consumer goods. She pictures herself as a perishable object with an expiration date, food, to be desired and devoured to the satisfaction and nourishment of the devouring party. In her rebellion she only conforms to the feminine ideal of traditional China: passive means of satisfaction to others. It is the same mechanism that has driven women of all times to conform more thoroughly to the feminine

ideal of the day as to looks, age or fashion in the misplaced hopes that it will increase their prospects and it will grant them a higher status, that there is an individual way to overcome gender oppression.

But for the most part in *Joy Luck Club* too, Chinese girls are taught their place in the system. "Haven't I taught you -- that it is wrong to think of your own needs? A girl can never ask, only listen" (JLC, 70). Lindo in her fight against being considered no good on account of her gender never thinks of her own needs either, only of those of the other. But she makes the mistake of failing to just listen and actually thinks she has something to say. It turns out that what she has to say is what she was conditioned to say.

Passivity in the education of a girl is taken to the point of self-denial "A boy can run and chase dragonflies, because that is his *nature* [my italics.] But a girl should stand still. If you are still for a very long time, a dragonfly will no longer see you. Then it will come to you and hide in the comfort of your shadow" (JLC, 72). The cultural coding of gender differences favoring male assertiveness and female inaction masquerades the social as the natural, just as Bourdieu argues.

Humility, the main feminine virtue in Pan Chao's *Admonitions*, together with self-denial that make women into serviceable tools is paramount in Tan's portrayal of Chinese femininity. An-mei confesses, "I was raised the Chinese way; I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness" (JLC, 215).

Tan pictures her own "no name woman" in *Joy Luck Club*. She is merely known as An-mei's mother. She is also called "wife" by her servant, and injuriously reprimanded by her offended family who deliberately never once mention her name. The readers never get to know her name. Her story becomes that of the generic Chinese woman. She is a concubine and her life illuminates concepts, customs and social practices relevant for the place women held in Chinese society.

After Tan's "no name woman" is widowed, while traveling to a temple she is seen by Wu Tsing and his second wife who is traveling with him. "Wu Tsing must have seen her beauty immediately. Back then your mother had hair down to her waist, which she tied high up on her head. And she had unusual skin, a lustrous pink color. Even in her white widow clothes she was beautiful! But because she was a widow, she was worthless in many

respects. She could not remarry" (JLC, 236). The rules of chastity prevent her from having a life separate from her deceased husband. She is forbidden to make her own choice, but others are allowed to make the choice for her because when it comes to the sexual satisfaction of males she is fair game and her beauty works against her. The association between feminine beauty and trouble present in Toni Morrison comes up again. For the defenseless, visibility is a trap.

Wu Tsing's devious and manipulative second wife tricks "no name woman" into coming to their house, where she is jumped by him. "He grabbed her by the hair and threw her on the floor, then put his foot on her throat and told her to undress. Your mother did not scream or cry when he fell on her...[S]he left in a rickshaw, her hair undone and with tears streaming down her face" (JLC, 237).

Upon going home, because she broke her vow of chastity and therefore disgraced her family "her brother kicked her and her mother banned her from the family house forever.... So, when Wu Tsing asked your mother to be his third concubine, to bear him a son, what choice did she have? She was already as low as a prostitute" (JLC, 237). Thus, the "no name woman" is forced to go

back to the man who raped her and submit willingly to his sexual exploitation.

The late imperial chastity cult requires women to take sometimes horrific steps to preserve their sexual purity. Mark Elvin in his study "Female Virtue and the State in China" [12] displays a shocking illustration of a woman who severed her hand which she dispassionately contemplates lying on the ground, while her terrified child is crying and clinging to her skirts (p. 145). The caption explains that because the innkeeper who turned her away without giving her a room touched her she removed the defiled part of her body. The moral conviction that made women maim or kill themselves to deter a rapist or any circumstance that would call their chastity into question is the subject of gazetteers who present vivid biographical stories.[13]

If one reads the rape episode according to the rape laws in Qing China,[14] for instance, the reaction the victim gets from the community is quite appropriate, because no matter how brutal a crime it seems to the contemporary American reader, in late imperial China this is no rape at all. In order to prove rape, the victim needs to provide eyewitnesses or people who heard the victim's cries for help, whereas "no name woman" did not

scream or cry. The victim also needs to provide irrefutable evidence that she struggled with the rapist "throughout the entire ordeal" because "when initially violence had been used, but subsequently the woman had submitted *voluntarily*" [my italics] it was not rape; it was "illicit intercourse by mutual consent" and the woman was subject to punishment (Ng, 58). Therefore, when "no name woman" did as told with Wu Tsing's foot on her throat, she submitted voluntarily instead of fighting him off. The Qing rape laws even go so far as to establish that "when a man, having witnessed an illicit affair, proceeded to force himself on the woman, the incident could not be regarded as rape, because the woman was already a fornicator" (Ng, 58). This basically makes gang rape a free for all. The point in question is that the rape laws leave no doubt whatsoever as to the status of "no name woman" after having been raped, that is, after having "illicit intercourse by mutual consent."

Women who found themselves disgraced committed suicide to redeem themselves and the honor of their family. According to Tan, they seemed to have an ulterior motive, too. In one of her interviews where she discusses what she calls her legacy of depression she confesses, "There's a photograph of my grandmother in China in 1921.

She's with three other women in her family. Every woman in the picture committed suicide. The belief was that if you killed yourself, your ghost could come back and wreak havoc on those who had wronged you" (*People*, 85).

But "no name woman" doesn't commit suicide then. She will do so later in the novel. Instead, she becomes a concubine and brings shame on her family. To her family she is a ghost. Instead of just vanishing, she continues to exist as a living proof of the crime committed against her.

But "no name woman" still follows the traditional rules of filial piety, even after her mother throws her out. When her mother is on her deathbed, she goes back to fulfill her filial duty. Her little girl from her first marriage, whom she is not allowed to take with her in her shameful position, watches her try to save her own mother. " I saw my mother on the other side of the room. Quiet and sad. She was cooking a soup, pouring herbs and medicines into the steaming pot. And then I saw her pull up her sleeve and pull out a sharp knife. She put this knife on the softest part of her arm. I tried to close my eyes, but could not. And then my mother cut a piece of meat from her arm. Tears poured from her face and blood

spilled on the floor. My mother took the flesh and put it in the soup. She cooked magic in the ancient tradition to try and cure her mother this one last time" (JLC, 48). The episode described refers to the practice of *ko-ku* in which a son or daughter cut a piece of his or her flesh "for an ailing parent to eat as a specially blessed and restorative medicine" (T'ien Ju'k'ang, 152).[15] It is a sign of the deepest respect, since they are of the same flesh, and "no name woman" wants to make up for the disgrace she brought upon her mother with her behavior.

Muted, oppressed, and fully aware that they "should have an unhappy life so someone else could have a happy one" (JLC, 58,) Chinese women immigrate to the U.S. in hopes of a better life. They have "unspeakable tragedies they left behind in China and hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English" (JLC, 20). Their history of repression and the challenges of an alien environment leave them in a state of numbness.

When Ying-Ying St. Clair comes to America, she barely speaks English and her husband very little Chinese so that a real dialogue or even communication is hardly possible. With her husband "she spoke in moods and gestures, looks and silences, and sometimes a combination of English punctuated by hesitations and Chinese

frustration. So [her husband] would put words into her mouth" (JLC, 106). This language barrier isn't a transient phase in their marriage until one or both learn the language, either. It is the way their marriage goes. Different circumstances from imperial China, same result: mute women with husbands to speak for them.

In China, women were reconciled with their fate. They knew "that was China. That was what people did back then. They had no choice. They could not speak up. They could not run away. That was their fate" (JLC, 241). In the land of all possibilities Lindo needs a husband to be able to stay in the country. When she meets her future husband, she knows "it was not like my first marriage, where everything was arranged. I had a choice. I could choose to marry your father, or I could choose not to marry him and go back to China" (JLC, 262-3). So ironically, in the land where some complain of too many choices, she can choose between marrying Tim Jong, and going back to China, to no choice at all.

Chinese women come to America to escape their fate and make a better life for their daughters. They sail across the ocean with the mission to make sure that "[i]n America [they] will have daughter[s] just like [themselves]. But over there nobody will say [their]

worth is measured by the loudness of [their] husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on [them], because [they] will make [them] speak only perfect American English" (JLC, 17). But there's a catch and Chinese women have one more price to pay.

There is a lot they need to get adjusted to. In China with its stiff hierarchical system, ancestry and social position are givens that cannot be overcome. "If you are born poor here, [in America] it's no lasting shame. You are first in line for a scholarship. If the roof crashes on your head, no need to cry over this bad luck. You can sue anybody, make the landlord fix it" (JLC, 254). They catch up quickly on the American commercialism. In a deliberately ironic way Tan has Lindo name her sons Winston and Vincent. "I liked the meaning of those two words 'wins ton.' I wanted to raise a son who would win many things, praise, money, a good life...Vincent sounds like 'win cent,' the sound of making money" (JLC, 265). So she catches up quickly on the American values and leaves behind the Chinese ones.

The Chinese American daughters are faced with their own difficulties and social pressures growing up a minority in a culture that clearly privileges the white majority. On top of it, the cultural gap makes the

Chinese American daughters not understand the Chinese ways of their mothers, thus alienating them from their roots. Ignorant of Chinese customs, they take a Western view in decoding their mothers' cultural affiliations and feel deeply embarrassed to see them break social norms, unable to integrate into the way of life. Jing-mei Woo, a teenager, that is at an age of heightened sensitivity when every minor inconvenience takes on catastrophic proportions, lists the terrible things her mother does as if to embarrass her on purpose, like " haggling with store owners, pecking her mouth with a toothpick in public, being color-blind to the fact that lemon yellow and pale pink are not good combinations for winter clothes" (JLC, 267).

They also have to face racial discrimination that automatically assigns ethnicity a subservient position. In a street incident where Lena St. Clair (the daughter of a Chinese mother and Caucasian father who taking after her father looks white) and her mother are scared by a weird-acting man while walking to the bus stop, the two people present at the scene intervene saying: "Joe, stop it, for Chrissake. You're scaring that poor little girl and her maid" (JLC, 108). Even Chinese women themselves come to acknowledge their heritage as an impediment for

their daughters' chances of success. Lindo ponders sadly: "I cannot see my faults, but I know they are there. I gave my daughter these faults. The same eyes, the same cheeks, the same chin" (JLC, 265).

Chinese Americans feel the rejection and isolation from mainstream America so acutely that racial identity becomes a prominent factor in fighting their alienation. Although they shy away from taking on the establishment and demanding a more fair treatment in the vocal, organized way African Americans do, discrimination brings them closer: "In a crowd of Caucasians, two Chinese people are already like family" (JLC, 198). Instead of fighting the establishment, Chinese Americans strive to join it, to fit in.

The effect of the combined social pressures and growing up as a minority add up to make the daughters ashamed of the heritage they don't understand but have ample indication that it works against them and the mothers are fully aware of it. This is one more price they have to pay in their fight for a better life, if not for them, at least for their daughters. "I use my American face. That's the face Americans think is Chinese, the one they cannot understand. But inside I am becoming ashamed. I am ashamed that she is ashamed.

Because she is my daughter and I am proud of her, and I am her mother and she is not proud of me" (JLC, 255).

The gap between the Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters leaves them strangely at odds. Jing-mei Woo reflects upon the differences separating her from her mother. "[M]y mother and I spoke two different languages....I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese" (JLC, 34). "We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than was said, while my mother heard more" (JLC, 37). Besides the ironic generational implications, the meaningful difference is between the high-context Chinese and American culture.

Growing up in America the daughters are convinced that the American way is better. As Rose Hsu confesses, "Over the years, I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better" (JLC, 191).

All the influences and discrimination combined make the daughter reject the Chinese heritage and deny their Chinese side in an effort to fit in. (Jing-mei) "I was fifteen and had vigorously denied that I had any Chinese whatsoever below my skin. I was a sophomore at Galileo

High in San Francisco, and all my Caucasian friends agreed: I was about as Chinese as they were" (JLC, 267).

Even the mothers look for Caucasian ideals of beauty for their daughters to emulate in an effort to insure they get the best there is. Lindo explains to her daughter Waverly: "I wanted everything for you to be better. I wanted you to have the best circumstances, the best character. I didn't want you to regret anything" (JLC, 265).

The ideals they value and would like perpetuated in their daughters are the American icons. The Shirley Temple syndrome prominent in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes* apparently has an enduring effect on all races. Jing-mei Woo's mother takes her to a beauty training school to have her hair done to look like Shirley Temple's. She wants her daughter to be "a Chinese Shirley Temple" (JLC, 132). Not surprisingly the end result is less than satisfactory since Jing-mei doesn't turn out a cute blond little girl. "Instead of getting the big fat curls, I emerged with an uneven mass of crinkly black fuzz....'You look like a Negro Chinese,' she lamented as if I had done this on purpose" (JLC, 133). Her lamentation highlights her fears in no uncertain terms. Instead of the step up she had hoped for, that would

improve her prospects, her daughter took a step down to the lowest racial position there was.

Cleaning houses for rich people, Jing-mei's Chinese mother wants her daughter to belong to the social elite, which happens to be white. She wants her to somehow leave who she is behind, turn into a white ideal of perfection, and turn around her social and economic prospects. What gets lost in the process is the Chineseness. The idols of perfection and glamorous success are white. Not accidentally "Cinderella stepping from her pumpkin carriage with sparkly cartoon music filling the air," the fairy tale character who rises from rags to riches, is another ideal of both mother and daughter. But then, the meteoric rise from rags to riches due to personal qualities is deeply ingrained in American psyche in the form of the American ideal of the self-made man, and it is an all-time American popular culture favorite motive too.

The perceivable result of these pursuits is that the daughters want to be glamorous Caucasians and feel Chinese is inferior and ugly, an abomination they want nothing to do with. Lena St. Clair who looks Caucasian like her father still has problems with her eyes. "[M]y mother gave me my eyes, no eyelids, as if they were

carved on a jack-o'-lantern with two swift cuts of a short knife. I used to push my eyes in on the sides to make them rounder" (JLC, 104). The associations invited by the image are clearly demeaning, inferior, and even scary, something cheaply and unprofessionally made for fun the way people carve pumpkin figures for Halloween then throw them away with the trash.

Jing-mei, who like any other little girl growing up in America bought into the white ideals of beauty from an early age, cries until her mother buys her the doll she dreams of. "It was an American doll with yellow hair" (JLC, 273). Later on when she grows up she cannot get reconciled with her "ugliness": "I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and when I saw only my face staring back- I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! I made high-pitched noises like a crazed animal, trying to scratch out the face in the mirror" (JLC, 134). The feeling of worthlessness and self-hatred are some of the consequences they will have to overcome. They turn self-destructive. Lena confesses: "I had stopped eating,... to be fashionably anorexic like all the other thirteen-year-old girls who were dieting....I was sitting at the breakfast table, waiting for my mother to finish packing

a sack lunch which I always promptly threw away as soon as I rounded the corner" (JLC, 153).

Although their denial of ethnicity, roots, and family may be blamed to a certain extent on the attitude all rebellious teenagers have to distance themselves from their parents in an effort to find a separate identity for themselves, the cases in question are a lot more severe and have deeper racial reasons.

In spite of all efforts to the contrary, the Chinese American daughters do not turn out very different from the Chinese ideal of femininity. Tan even suggests they are American translations of their mothers.

Lena St. Clair is a smart career woman but a doormat in her relationship with Harold. They are both architects working in interior design. Lena encourages Harold to start his own firm and contributes her brilliant ideas to make it a success, but never gets real credit for any of it or the promotion she deserves inside his firm. They talk a lot about being equal and split all expenses in half, although Harold makes a lot more than Lena, but in fact she is treated as inferior all the time and she is not only aware of it, but fine with it. It started out that way since they met working for the same firm. He was thirty-four and she twenty-eight, just a project

assistant. Thus from the beginning he is the authority figure, and this is the way it stays. She is paralyzed into inaction when it comes to their relationship. She cannot bring herself to even talk to him about the little things that are bothering her. At the same time she becomes invisible to him. Lena's mother in a sarcastic remark about Harold's complete disregard of Lena tells him: "She become so thin now you cannot see her….She like a ghost, disappear" (JLC, 163). Just like the traditional Chinese women, Lena is incapable of standing up for herself, incapable of asserting herself. She is possessed by "this feeling of surrendering everything to him, with abandon, without caring what [she] get[s] in return" (JLC, 160). Thus the typical ingredients of the classic Chinese marriage: passivity, inaction, inability to speak on the part of the woman and utter disrespect and blatantly ignoring her needs by her husband are present again; only this time it is an American marriage.

Rose Hsu and her husband Ted settle into the victim -hero pattern from the beginning. Because she faces race discrimination from his family, he runs to her rescue. "I was always in danger and he was always rescuing me. I would fall and he would lift me up"(JLC, 119). It is difficult to trace the pattern's genealogy since it is

prevalent in many cultures. The "powerful men and fragile helpless women in desperate need of masculine protection" cliché was popular with the troubadours of medieval France, it is popular with American popular culture, romance novels, soaps, and it is the cliché Mulan rebels against.

Rose is looking for "kindness and protection," buying into the gender stereotype (JLC, 195). Her husband is in charge and definitely makes all the important decisions. "Over the years, Ted decided where we went on vacation. He decided what new furniture we should buy. He decided we should wait until we moved into a better neighborhood before having children" (JLC, 119). Eventually, he decides he wants a divorce and walks out on Rose, making clear his contempt for her submissiveness, which he takes for inferiority, even ineptitude. "What would you have done with your life if I had never married you?" (JLC, 120).

Rose is left wondering why she turned out that way. "At first I thought it was because I was raised with all this Chinese humility....Or that maybe it was because when you're Chinese you're supposed to accept everything, flow with the Tao and not make waves" (JLC, 156). After she is persuaded that she was "manipulated into thinking

that [she was] nothing next to him [,] [a]nd now [after Ted left her she thought that she was] nothing without him" (JLC, 189), she finally brings herself to stand up to him.

Instead of living the dream life their Chinese mothers immigrated to the U.S. for, the Chinese American women in Tan's *Joy Luck Club* continue the tradition of being considered inferior, muted and silenced in their oppression like the ancestral Chinese woman their mothers ran away from. Gender roles and gender identity in American culture might not be what they are in traditional Chinese culture, but there are enough similarities when it comes to feminine oppression to make it difficult to trace the exact affiliations.

The meaningful difference for the Chinese immigrant women is that by know they realize a truth at the core of Kingston and Tan's enterprise. It dawns on An-mei, Tan's "no name woman's" daughter, while listening to her own daughter Rose telling her she didn't have a choice. "She cried, 'No choice! No choice!' She doesn't know. If she doesn't speak, she is making a choice" (JLC, 215).

### III.5. Writing History into Women

For the purpose of this study I am interested in how female bodies are inscribed by culture, history, race,

gender, and class. As Warner argues, in Western culture the female body "is still the map on which we mark our meaning, it is chief among the metaphors used to see and present ourselves and in the contemporary profusion of imagery, from news photography to advertising to fanzines to pornography, the female body recurs more frequently than any other" (331).[16]

Existence in society entails differences, hierarchy, and a quest for distinction and recognition. The dominant social structures are reconstituted through our daily actions and practices as we strive to realize our personal goals. For Bourdieu, just as for Foucault, the body is the place where culture and social structures are manifested and produced, where a particular culture and class is embodied through social practices. "The body is in the social world but the social world is in the body" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 20).[17] For this reason marginalization and exclusion, forms of material or symbolic transgressions, as well as the process of constructing the Other happen to a great extent through the body, hence the central importance of bodily practice for the reproduction of dominant culture.

Fashion, as well as individual "taste," reflect and reproduce the values of the dominant culture. Developed through internalizing and embodying the culture, gender and class specific dispositions and tastes through every day social practices inform every manifestation of the body: etiquette, manners, gestures, stature and mobility. Every physical attribute: the shape, size and adornment of the body, the way we walk, talk, sit carry a particular "political" meaning, as a manifestation of power and it is constructed within the parameters of the dominant discourse.

Judith Butler observes the following in *Introducing Human Geographies*: "The body: which orders our access to and mobility in spaces and places; which interfaces with technology and machinery; which encapsulates our experiences of the world around us; which harbours unconscious desires, vulnerabilities, alienations and fragmented aspects of self, as well as expressions of sexuality and gender; and which is a site of cultural consumption where choices of food and clothing and jewellery, for example, will inscribe meanings about the person" (45). Those inscribed meanings will reflect people's quest for recognition and dignity as well as their culture and class, since, as Bourdieu suggests, the

body exists simultaneously both in nature and in culture. He underlies that culture not only is imprinted on the body, it is the way it is produced and reproduced. He argues that bodily discourse operates subconsciously imprinting the body with cultural and social meaning that the body keeps reflecting: "[t]he principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness and, hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit" (Bourdieu, 1977: 94).[18]

Bourdieu also argues that not only are bodies inscribed with culture, but also their involvement in social and cultural practices fundamentally shapes dispositions and "tastes," therefore regulating personal behavior. This emphasizes the links between habitus, practice, and gender.[19]

In their search for identity Chinese American women have to reconcile two sets of conflicting cultural expectations while standing in the crossfire of racism and sexism.

Chinese women traditionally have no voice or visibility; they are silenced and muted by centuries of misogynistic practices. Because they are caught in a

historic struggle to regain their voice and make visible their sufferings, a traditional Chinese feminine complaint is to let the crimes done to them be known. Because they have been excluded from the social realm and secluded inside the domestic, they have struggled over centuries to inscribe their presence into the records of history and thus assert their denied existence.

In Kingston's novel, before Mulan goes to war, her parents make sure that whatever happens their sacrifice will be known by carving a list of their grievances on her body. They make her kneel and she goes through the ordeal, willingly braving the suffering due to her special training into martial arts. "My father first brushed the words in ink, and they fluttered down my back row after row. Then he began cutting; to make fine lines and points he used thin blades, for the stems, large blades. My mother caught the blood and wiped the cuts with a cold towel soaked in wine. It hurt terribly-the cuts sharp; the air burning; the alcohol cold, then hot-pain so various. I gripped my knees. I released them. Neither tension nor relaxation helped. I wanted to cry. If not for the fifteen years of training, I would have writhed on the floor; I would have had to be held down. The list of grievances went on and on." (34-5)

It should be noted that both in the case of Mulan, where her father does the inscribing while her mother is trying to provide comfort, and in the case of Sethe (the chokecherry tree on her back discussed in the previous chapter) the inscribing is done by men, by authority figures, with women providing the slate to be inscribed.

Chinese American women still have a list of grevances. They cannot be rank ordered, but probably racial discrimination takes a prominent place. Being non-white in a white dominated culture is traumatizing and even more so for first and second-generation immigrants. The first generation American born Chinese women in the novels under consideration want to fit in, to feel that they belong, and to distance themselves from their parents who can never leave behind their Chinese ancestry. To the embarrassment of the daughters (I only consider female characters) who, lacking Chinese cultural context, can only take an American perspective, their parents' Chinese ancestry is manifested for the most part as broken English and breaking social norms. The first generation immigrants cannot integrate into the American lifestyle; they stick out. The daughters' ignorance of Chinese culture and customs translates into an embarrassment that makes them reject their Chineseness as

something monstrous, something they strive to expunge as they develop a sense of self-hatred.

Being American born and schooled, their English is no different from the other Americans, but their looks are. The physical body is paramount in the construction of identity, self-image, and a sense of empowerment. Not being white in a white-dominated culture can have traumatic self-deprecating effects. Nellie Wong confesses, "when I was growing up, I felt dirty. I thought that god made white people clean and no matter how much I bathed, I could not change. I could not shed my skin in the gray water" (119).[20]

In the Western dominant discourse the idea of personal success is associated to a great extent with the ideal of whiteness. This has a particularly powerful impact on the first-and second-generation immigrants who feel an additional pressure to fit in, but on the whole it affects Asian women in general, just as it did in the case of black women in the previous chapter. Asian features are perceived as ugly (just as we saw black features were by black women), and an obstacle to self-accomplishment. This phenomenon was a lot more powerful at the time the novels under consideration were published in the 70s and 80s, before the fashion industry construed

ethnic features as exotic and chic, but it is still fairly strong.

Beauty and fashion magazines targeting Asian women capitalize on their insecurities and reinforce the stereotypes. The image of perfection that lures women, and especially minority women, to buy cosmetics is for the most part represented by white models and actresses in the media. Most minority women think, for example, that having white skin is beautiful. Black women have a history of bleaching their skin, and it is a well-known fact that they consider lighter skin, no matter how acquired, beautiful. There is no coincidence that once they hit it rich, their skin tends to become lighter as even celebrities completely engaged in promoting black women power and their African American heritage, icons such as Oprah Winfrey, demonstrate.

Publicity slogans used to promote products, like *"White skin gives you confidence"* or L'Oréal naming a line of cosmetics targeting Asian women *White Perfect* have an insidious effect. Chinese women have always believed that anyway. Traditionally in China porcelain white faced dolls were symbols of beauty. There is a Chinese saying "A white covers three uglies" meaning that

white skin will take precedence over and cover other imperfections of the face.

But the trend goes well beyond a white face. Asian women do not want a pair of "sleepy" eyes with single eyelids and a flat nose, traditional Asian features, either. *Time Asia* magazine in an article entitled "Changing Faces"[21] investigates this issue. Their research showed that Asian women are turning to cosmetic surgery like never before. They claim that changing their features to make them look Caucasian changes their status from landing a high-paying job previously inaccessible to having a happier life overall, being noticed by men, gaining confidence. A tight labor market forces the competitors to also try to look more attractive. Some apply a strip of glue to their eyelids to make their eyes look wider and rounder, consequently *prettier*. The procedure is awkward and needs to be repeated several times a day. Surgery, creating a permanent crease, gets rid of the problem for good.

*White* features- big, round eyes, a tall nose, a defined chin- are linked to money in a double way, as a sign of status, as Asian women widely believe that having them will improve their fortune, and the other way round

making enough money will enable them to get the face they have always dreamed of.[22]

The surgical procedures, in spite of anesthetics, are painful, but beauty has long been associated with suffering for the Asians maybe even more than for women in general, if we only think of the tradition of footbinding. In fact, it seems that the earliest records of reconstructive plastic surgery come from Asia, from the sixth century Hindu medical chronicle *Susruta Samhita* that "describes how noses were recreated after being chopped off as punishment for adultery"[23] (*TA*, 8). Nowadays it is about a different sort of punishment. Women pay for deviating from the norms of feminine beauty.

Harvard psychology professor Nancy Etcoff, in her book Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty, argues, "beauty, after all, is evolutionary." It looks like the present evolution points towards Western domination and a tendency of Asians under the relentless pressure of the media, movie, and fashion industries to remake themselves to look more Caucasian. The number one procedure by far is blepharoplasty, which uses a scalpel or needle and thread to create a crease above the eye.

Asian bodies require innovative surgery to achieve the leggy, skinny, busty Western ideal of beauty becoming increasingly universal. Liposuction, effective to slim Westerners legs, doesn't work for Asians because it is muscle not fat that accounts for their bulk. "Earlier attempts to carve the muscle were painful and made walking difficult." Doctor Suh, one of the surgeons interviewed by *Time Asia* magazine, proudly confesses that "finally [he] discovered that by severing a nerve behind the knee, the muscle would atrophy, reducing its size up to 40%" (*TA*, 8). Doctor Suh has performed over 600 operations since 1996.

Low self-esteem is a great factor in turning women to cosmetic surgery. A social worker who runs a support group for battered women attended by Chinese women noted the following: "Three out of the five women have had cosmetic surgery, including nose jobs, liposuction, and cosmetic eye surgery. Ms. Gau, [one of the social workers,] thinks that this high incidence of plastic surgery results from the women being constantly told by men that they are stupid, ugly, and do not deserve to be alive."[24]

Caucasian women are made to feel inadequate and discriminated against for different reasons and

consequently have their own list of grievances. The message the media sends all women is that they owe it to themselves to look as young and as beautiful as possible for as long as possible. It may have started with Hollywood where the cliché has it that there is no place for the old, ugly, or fat, but it developed into a general tyranny women (and more recently men) are subjected to. Whether for vanity, ego or hard cash, women are led to believe that they all want to look better, younger, more fabulous; they all want to boost their self-esteem.

Mary Jiang Bresnahan conducted a study of prime-time commercials aimed to establish what categories of the population were targeted and in what ways and her findings are little surprise.[25] The study revealed that 95% of the characters that appeared in prime-time commercials were seen as youthful, 91% as attractive, 85% as confident and 81% as healthy. Females were more likely to be seen in the house and males outside the home. The voice heard in the commercial was 69% male to 31% female. So much for the effects of the gender revolution. So, the gender roles are in no imminent danger of changing, the voice of authority is still predominantly male. The norm is young and attractive, confident and healthy.

L'Oréal targets Asian women with their line of products *White Perfect*, but they have a line of products marketed for Caucasian women too, this time it's *Age Perfect*. The cultural stereotypes stare back at women from the mirror exaggerating any deviation from the norm into an unacceptable transgression. Unless they want to be rejected and treated as outcasts, they need to conform to the stereotype. Those unwilling to pay the price become invisible, unwanted, and unnecessary. Knife carved beauty is the answer. In a way the distance between what used to be considered "primitive," "barbaric" customs such as footbinding or the giraffe women of Padaung and plastic surgery, *the fastest growing branch of the economy*,[26] has shrunk a lot. Torturing the body in the name of some beauty ideal has become every day reality for many women.

A lot of writing is still being done on female bodies. Wrinkles that signify the *undesirable* process of aging,[27] breasts that are too small or too large according to the latest fashion, thighs too big are better taken care of or else! Or else, women are led to believe that their social life and even their livelihood are in jeopardy. And here is where the root of the problem lies. It is considered manly and even sexy to have a certain

age that becomes associated with experience, authority and prestige for men, but it is a serious transgression for women, a transgression that does not go unsanctioned. It makes no difference whatsoever that women's ability to perform the job isn't in any way related to their looks.[28]

Women were traditionally more vulnerable to the ugliness complex anyway because for centuries they were led to believe that their looks were the most important factor in succeeding in life as their market value in the marriage economy, for a long time their only option, depended on it. The Victorian dictum "women should be seen not heard" is just another relic in the gallery of gender oppression (and still going strong if prime-time commercials are to be taken at *face value*), all pointing in the same direction: looks and youth are a woman's main assets. Little wonder then that the present cultural and social pressure work so well.

Age, ugliness, and fatness are all on the list of women's grievances. Fat can be sucked out of problem areas or injected into the lips to make them look fuller and more attractive. Botox (who cares if it's a poison paralyzing the muscles,) injected into the wrinkles takes care of aging. Plastic surgery can fix it all. All beauty requires is cash. And about time too, as we moved from

racial and ethnic to gender discrimination to come full circle and reach class discrimination also. Those who can't afford it are out of the game.

A recent study from the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (AAFPRS) shows that the number one elective facial cosmetic surgical procedure performed by AAFPRS surgeons was blepharoplasty (eyelid surgery that involves removing bags and fat around the eyes), followed closely by rhinoplasty, facelifts, laser resurfacing and forehead lifts.[29] The survey also reveals that the AAFPRS surgeons are performing nearly four times the number of cosmetic surgery procedures annually on females than they are on males. The surgeons also report that the patients consistently cited the same reasons for their decision: looking younger and enhancing appearance. 90% of women reported looking younger as one of their top reasons for considering facial cosmetic surgery. Plastic surgery, which used to be considered a sign of extreme vanity has increasingly become less and less of a choice and more and more a necessity as American society at large views older women as having outlived their usefulness in the labor force and at home.

And if one would be tempted to believe that advances in modern medicine and the use of anesthetics in our day and age distance us from the "barbaric" practices of "primitive" societies, one only needs to look into what happens when things go wrong, or ask any patient who underwent plastic surgery about the pain she had been through in order to dispel that misconception. Torturing the body in the name of a beauty ideal is a constant with sterile medium and instruments thrown in. Grievances are still carved into the body, and at a faster pace than ever before with women the main beneficiaries.

## Conclusion

My study examines the way female authors coming from the so-called "marginal" groups construct femininity. I also examine what goes into that construction, and what instruments women use to perform that construction with.

There are many similarities among the ethnic writers I examine, not least of which a long tradition that is rooted in the bond between women and the word. All three of them have a clear interest in the relationship between gender and identity construction in American culture. All three of them in writing from their Native American or African American or Chinese American perspective reached a wide readership and expanded the understanding and sympathy for women belonging to their particular groups, projecting them into mainstream culture.

There are similarities that border on coincidence, like the fact that both Joy Luck Club and Love Medicine, the novels that gave their authors Amy Tan and Louise Erdrich respectively, instant fame, were not initially conceived as novels. They began as several short stories that with some editing turned into novels.

There are many differences, probably the most meaningful from the perspective of my study the very different cultural issues highlighted in the process of

contesting feminine stereotypes. The disappointment is that, when it's all said and done, the subversive potential of their endeavor is limited by what looks like an insurmountable history of (mis)representation. One problem is that the dominant discourse so insidiously pervades all layers of thinking and all its institutionalized expression, that the instruments themselves are contaminated and corrupted. Language, the words "man" and "woman," are loaded with a lot of unavoidable baggage. In talking about gender construction, the authors I discuss and I use the same patriarchal concepts to define the feminine and the masculine.

Hierarchical and oppressive distinctions lie embedded in the representations and images of women. As long as in talking about gender construction the female authors use the same patriarchal tools, like binary logic for example, that define the feminine and the masculine as opposed concepts, their efforts to construct a different take on gender issues will continue to be frustrated, and they will be fighting a losing battle; in trying to fight the stereotypes they end up reinforcing them. When I have to explain how Sula or Father Damien or Jadine go against the norms of stereotypical feminine

characters, I only reinforce that stereotypical view of the feminine, setting them up as a marginal alternative to the dominant view. The word "feminine" is loaded and I cannot avoid it for lack of a better choice.

Being inside the system, and, therefore, subject to the same cultural, historic and social influences the authors are challenging doesn't help either, as it is most obvious in the case of Morrison who quite often applies sexist or racist values in an effort to change them.

The literary canon changed somewhat, but there is no lasting damage done to the male-dominated views of femininity in mainstream culture. When Hortense Spillers explains the situation for black women, she expresses a reality for all women. She argues that "black women have no voice, no text, and consequently no history. [As my study showed this is even more true of Chinese women.] They can be written and written upon precisely because they exist as the ultimate Other whose absence or (non)being only serves to define the being or presence of the white or male subject. The black woman symbolizing a kind of double negativity, becomes a *tabula rasa* upon which the racial/sexual identity of the other(s)can be positively inscribed" (69). The inscribing has been done

and is used as a reference point for all future challenges. And again the loaded words don't help either. When I say "challenge" I imply an uphill battle, therefore, I implicitly reinforce that there is a stronger, better-established norm firmly in place that I try to chip at, and I put myself in a lesser position in fighting it. The power structure, as well as its implications for my argument, is hard to miss.

This explains the apparent contradiction between the title of my dissertation and its scope. In spite of the best efforts, the male construction of female bodies everybody knows to be inaccurate, all ridiculous bells and whistles, proven and recognized as unfounded, reigns supreme.

## Notes

Part I.

[1] Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight, p.228

[2] Judith Butler, Gender Trouble.

[3] For her religious views see H. Wendell Howard, 111.

[4] Sherman Alexie has a very enlightening take on the issue of race that clarifies the distinctions of being Indian in "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven."

[5] Reversibility cuts both ways, obviously. In The Antelope Wife, a murderous soldier who raises a little girl he finds, literally turns into a mother and starts lactating, so he can feed the child.

[6] Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter p.5.

[7] For more on this see J. Rollins, *Between Women: Domestics and their Employers* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1985).

[8] It should be noted that symbols have a different power and axiology within the religious faith of the Catholic Church from the ones they have even for other denominations, let alone for the purpose of a literary work. The wine and bread of the sacrament, for instance, are believed to be the true body of Christ, not just

symbols of the body of Christ the way they are for other religions.

[9] For more on this see Bourdieu, Masculine Domination.

[10] See Foucault, Discipline and Punish.

[11] See M. Bozon on contemporary French women who are similarly afflicted: 'Les femmes et l'écart d'âge entre conjoints: une domination consentie', I:'Types d'union et attentes en matière d'écart d'âge', *Population* 2 (1990), pp.327-60; 'Apparence physicque et choix du conjoint', *INED* [Institute Nationale des Études Démographiques], Congrès et colloques, 7 (1991), pp. 91-110.

[12] with the exception of her distant relative Moses Pillager.

[13] For a different take on Fleur's mythic powers see Susan Standford Friedman, 113.

[14] Playing cards so well that she cleans out whomever she likes is a clear reference to the mythic figure of the trickster.

[15] Another feature of the traditional trickster is being able to come back from the dead, move freely between worlds.

[16] Two of them die and one is permanently crippled, left a vegetable at the mercy of his wife.

[17] Nanapush, endowed with sacred powers as his name (traditional for trickster) suggests, sees clearly that it is Fleur's doing, and so suspects Margaret, too.

[18] Gloria Bird. "Searching for Evidence of Colonialism at Work: A Reading of Louise Erdrich's Tracks" *Wicazo* Review, 8:2 (1992): 44-47.

[19] The cover of the 1989 paperback of the first Perennial Library edition: New York: Harper & Row.

[20] Fleur's name comes from her French heritage and therefore it is not a fashion statement.

[21] With the exception of Lipsha, who is himself a very interesting case of male construction, (definitely not an alpha male) as if the baby, endearing nickname that sticks with him clearly marks his character.

[22] although the public humiliation can be reconstructed and relived in solitude.

[23] It is a typically male construction of honor, what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital, which can only be restored at the expense of other people's honor based on confrontation, domination and exclusion as if there was only a limited quantity to go around.

[24] For a different explanation of the episode see Beidler, 47.

[25] For more on this see Paula Gunn Allen, p 22-23.

[26] For the sex of the trickster see Ballinger, 18.

[27] Fleur's temporary sudden metamorphosis can be supported both by Erdrich's technique of making our knowledge of the characters and events forever partial, incomplete and subjective, open to many reversals and surprises, and by the mythic powers Fleur is endowed with, that would certainly grant her justified revenge.

[28] June makes a strong comeback in Bingo Palace. She appears in the life of her son, Lipsha, to help him like she never did while alive.

[29] I am not making here the claim that there are no violent, warrior goddesses, because we all know that they are easy to find in the Norse, or Greek mythology and elsewhere, but they are not what is commonly associated with the feminine.

[30] Obviously doing the work of God, not being above him.

[31] For more on this see Weaver, 253-254.

[32] See Bhabha, on the ideological construction of otherness, in *The Location of Culture*, Ch.4 "Of Mimicry and Man," pp.85-92.

[33] Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*.

[34] the patriarch of the Indian life style, "the last man on the reservation that could snare himself a deer" (LM, p.28)

[35] Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, p. 16

[36] See the *Gender That Is Not One*

[37] See Bourdieu on the issue of symbolic violence.

[38] Anne McClintock discusses the unconventional relationships with men present in Erdrich's work that challenge the romanticization of women in *The Bounds of Race*, ed. Dominick La Capra, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991. (pp.196-230.); Also see Jeanne Armstrong, *Demythologizing the Romance of Conquest*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000.

[39] And if there's anything to the rumors that her father is Meshupishu, the lake monster, even more so.

Part II.

[1] Interview with Toni Morrison, *Présence Afrikaine*, First Quarterly, 414.

[2] For Erdrich race, just like gender, is fluid and even reversible, more of a virtuality than a definitive, unavoidable reality. For example, one of her characters, Andy, the mud engineer, who appears to be white in Love Medicine will turn out to be in fact Indian in Tales of Burning Love.

[3] Surely feminism can also claim a history of powerful, rebellious women who defied the establishment, defeated the system at its own game, and made it to the top

becoming world leaders, or prominent trend-setting cultural icons, or just common people living their lives their own way. We talk about a *discipline* though, only when it comes together as a concentrated theoretical effort focused on a specific object of study.

[4] In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, xii

[5] see Racism - A Short History for a complete analysis of racism and racial attitudes.

[6] Speculum of the Other Woman.

[7] For an in-depth analysis of the process see Barbara Omolade's *Hearts of Darkness*.

[8] Disembodiment, evaluating women as to their body parts is a mark of patriarchy. At different times, different body parts took prominence in the construction of femininity, but the situation of black women during slavery is an extreme, unprecedented case in its deliberate and systematic brutality.

[9] Foucault, Nietzsche - On the Genealogy of Morals, 119.

[10] For a comprehensive analysis of rap music and its ramifications see Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America.

[11] Black rappers view their deliberate rejection of the white norms as an act of defiance and of asserting their racial identity.

[12] For more on this see The Soul of Black Folk, 16-18.

[13] Foucault argues that it is the object of genealogy to expose that fact and also "the process of history's destruction of the body." Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, 148.

[14] For more on this see Steve Olson, *The Genetic Archeology of Race*.

[15] Fiction and folklore: the novels of Toni Morrison, 151-64.

[16] Wallace 13-16. Subservience is regarded as penance for black women's complicity with white men during slavery.

[17] Barbara Welter, *The Cult of True Womanhood*, 21.

[18] See Vanessa Dickerson, Recovering the Black female Body, 196.

[19] see Recovering the Black Female Body, 206.

[20] Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, 390.

[21] Interview with Toni Morrison, *Présence Afrikaine*, First Quarterly, 413.

[22] Phenomenology, 106.

[23] It is a typical reaction in victims of abuse, whether women, children or other categories, but in a patriarchal society where women are the usual victims it came to symbolize the internalized feminine reaction as opposed

to the externalized, aggressive, violent male response when confronted with a similar situation.

[24] Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, 376.

[25] As opposed to white Midwestern values, where coming homes means one couldn't make it in the big town.

[26] Rosemarie Garland Thompson, Extraordinary Bodies.

[27] Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, 380.

[28] Ibid., 392.

[29] Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 1462.

[30] Harris has a comprehensive discussion of both the African myth and its Westernized version as well as their relevance for Morrison's narrative.

[31] With race not even a genetic reality, it is the culture the characters come from that determines their belonging to the place; this much is very clear in Tar Baby. Son, for example, is the poster child for his small backward rural community in Florida. He would be displaced in Africa. Rayson's idea that blacks belong in Africa, their natural habitat, is not only unfounded but racist, too.

[32] Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, "Children of those who chose to survive": Neo-Slave Narrative Authors Create Women of

Resistance, Womanist Theory and Research, Vol. 3.1 (1999).

[33] Morrison's attempt to transform the historical into the personal may point not only to a pattern for writing this novel but also to the fact that this is the only way she can share in the experience of her black ancestors. It is the means to make the experience available to her contemporary American black readers. What needs explaining again is the assumption that it would not be accessible in the same way to her white audience.

[34] Henderson uses the term in "Toni Morrison's Beloved: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text" where she argues that Sethe eventually has the power to change the past.

[35] Ann-Janine Morey has a different take on this issue arguing that for black writers "word and flesh, body and soul, belong together" in her article "Morrison and the Color of Life" in *Christian Century*.

[36] Most critics dealing with Sethe's body consider it as a historical site, and some, like Keenan relate it to the tension between myth and history.

Part III.

[1] See Adrienne Rich on "hierarchies of oppressions" *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 298.

[2] For more on this see Patricia Ebrey, Women and the Family in Chinese History.

[3] H. G. Creel in his book Confucius and the Chinese Way discusses sources that refer to Confucius's divorce.

[4] see Chu Hsi, "Family Rituals:" A Twelfth-Century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites

[4] Frederick Brandauer, "Women in the Ching-Hua Yüan" *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.XXXVI, No.4, August 1977, 657.

[5] It is interesting to compare the Chinese virtues to Welter's: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity from The Cult of True Womanhood to note that apparently gender oppression cuts through cultural barriers.

[6] http://www.naswnyc.org/di7.html

[7] For more on this see Vivien W. Ng, " Ideology and Sexuality: Rape Laws in Qing China", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 46, No.1, February 1987, 57-70.

[8] There are differences in the story itself and also in the interpretations of Mulan in the existing versions. A recent conversation with one of my Chinese friends about Mulan made me aware of my Western feminist biases in my reading of her. My friend's reading was that Mulan's father was not happy with her when she came back from war

because she had dishonored her family by not knowing her place; and that she actually shamed them the first time when she ran away to train in Martial arts.

[9] Kazuko Ono, *Chinese Women on a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel, Stanford: Stanford U Press, 1989, 8-9.

[10] For more on recentering women see pp. 64-92.

[11] Mark Elvin, "Female Virtue and the State in China," *Past and Present* 104 (1984): 111-52.

[12] See T'ien Ju-k'ang, Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Ethical Values in Ming-Ch'ing Times, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988.

[13] see Vivien Ng, "Ideology and Sexuality: Rape Laws in Qing China".

[13] For more on this see the appendix on the practice of *ko-ku* in T'ien Ju-k'ang, Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Ethical Values in Ming-Ch'ing Times, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988.

[14] see Warner, Monuments and Maidens, 331.

[15] see Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, J.D., *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, U of Chicago P, 1992.

[16] see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1977.

[17] see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice,* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990.

[18] Nellie Wong, "When I was Growing Up." Women Images and Realities. Mayfield, CA: 1999.

[19] August 5, 2002 / Vol.160 NO.4

[20] It is ironic that although the Asians have the highest per capita income ($17,921) after Whites ($19,181) as compared to African Americans ($11,899) and Hispanics ($10,048) they still feel such a strong presure to "look" white. The figures are for 1996 and come from the U.S. Census Bureau· http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/cb97-162.html

[21] Egyptians performed plastic surgery as early as 3400 B.C., but it was in India, sometime between the sixth century B.C. and the sixth century A.D. when the Hindu medical chronicle Susruta Samhita was written,. that the skill evolved.

[22] National Association of Social Workers, New York Chapter, http://www.naswnyc.org/di7.html

[23] Mary Jiang Bresnahan, "Changing Gender Roles on Prime-Time Commercials in Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan, and the United States," *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research,* July 2001.

[24] According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons the number of patients jumped from 412,901 in 1992 to 1,917,739 in 2001 http://www.plasticsurgery.org/public_education/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=2111 and the top five procedures according to the same source were: breast augmentation, liposuction, Botox injection, microdermabrasion and eyelid surgery.

[25] In our culture "natural" processes such as aging are considered undesirable and fought energetically.

[26] For a detailed discussion of gender discrimination in the media complete with lawsuits see Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth.

[27] Released at New York, January 15, 2001.

## Works Cited


Alexie, Sherman. "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven" in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.

Allen Gunn, Paula. The sacred hoop recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

Appiah, K. Anthony and Gutmann, Amy. Color Conscious: the Political Morality of Race. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Aristotle. Metaphysics. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Armstrong, Jeanne. Demythologizing the Romance of Conquest. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Badt, Karin Luisa. "The Roots of the Body in Toni Morrison: A Mater of Ancient 'Properties.'" African American Review 29 (1995): 567-77.

Baker, jr. Houston. "Maternal Narratives." In Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present. Eds. Gates, Henry Louis jr. and Appiah, K. Anthony. Amistad Press, 1993.

Baker-Fletcher, Karen. "Tar Baby and Womanist Theology." Theology Today. 50.1 (April 1993): 29-37.

Ballinger, Franchot. "Living Sideways: Social Themes and Social Relationships in Native American Trickster Tales." American Indian Quarterly. 13 (Winter 1989):15-30.

Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. "Children of those who chose to survive": Neo-Slave Narrative Authors Create Women of Resistance, Womanist Theory and Research, 3.1 (1999).

Bennett, Michael and Dickerson, D. Vanessa. Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001.

de Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. New York: Knopf, 1953.

Beidler, G. Peter. "The Facts of Fictional Magic: John Tanner as a Source for Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and *The Birchbark*." American Indian Culture and Research Journal.24.4 (2000):37-54.

Bhabha, Homi. The Location of Culture. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Gloria Bird. "Searching for Evidence of Colonialism at

Work: A Reading of Louise Erdrich's Tracks" *Wicazo* Review. 8:2 (1992): 44-47.

Bontemps, Arna and Hughes, Langston. Eds. The Book of Negro Folklore. NewYork: Dodd, Mead, 1958.

Bordo, Susan. Unbearable Weight: feminism, Western Culture and the Body. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Bourdieu, Pierre. Masculine Domination. trans. Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001.

---, Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1977.

---, The Logic of Practice, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990.

Bourdieu,P. & Wacquant, J.D., An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.

Bozon, Michel. *Population* 2 (1990); *INED* [Institute Nationale des Études Démographiques], Congrès et colloques, 7 (1991).

Brandauer, Frederick. "Women in the Ching-Hua Yüan" Journal of Asian Studies. Vol.XXXVI, No.4, August 1977, 657.

Bresnahan, Jiang Mary. "Changing Gender Roles on Prime-Time Commercials in Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan, and the United States," Sex Roles: A Journal of Research. July 2001.

Brown, Elaine. A Taste of Power: a Black Woman's Story. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.

Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity, New York: Routledge, 1990.

---, Bodies That Matter: on the discursive limits of "sex", New York : Routledge, 1993.

Canguilhem, Georges. On the Normal and the Pathological. Trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett. Dordrecht, Holland;Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co, 1978.

Carby, Hazel V. Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro- American Woman Novelist. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

Chavkin, Allan. Ed. The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1999.

Christian, Barbara. Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers. New York: Pergamon P, 1985.

Chu His. "Family Rituals:" A Twelfth-Century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa". The Critical

Condition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends. Ed. David H. Richter. Boston: Bedford Books, 1998. 1453-66.

Collins, Hill Patricia. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. New York : Routledge, 2000.

Creel, Herrlee Gressler. Confucius and the Chinese Way. New York: Harper, 1960.

DuBois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Context, Criticism. Eds. Gates, Henry Louis jr. and Oliver, Hume Terri. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

Ebrey, Patricia. Women and the Family in Chinese History. London; New York: Routledge, 2003.

Elvin, Mark. "Female Virtue and the State in China," Past and Present 104 (1984): 111-52.

Erdrich, Louise. The Last Report of the Miracles of Little No Horse, New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

---, The Antelope Wife, New York, N.Y.: HarperFlamingo, 1998.

---, Tales of Burning Love. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.

---, Love Medicine. New York: H. Holt, 1993.

---, Tracks. New York: Henry Holt, 1988.

Etcoff, Nancy. The Survival of the Prettiest: the Science of Beauty. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Fabre. Michel. From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991.

Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks. New York: Grove, 1967.

Friedman, Stanford Susan. "Identity Politics, Syncretism, Catholicism, and Anishinabe Religion in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*." Religion & Literature. 26.1 (Spring 1994): 107-133.

Foucault, Michel. Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon, 1980.

---, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

---, Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison; translated from French by Alan Sheridan, New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

Fredrickson, M. George. Racism: A Short History. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002.

Freud, Sigmund. Civilization and Its Discontents. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961.

Gates, Henry Louis jr. and Appiah, K. Anthony. Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present. New York: Amistad Press, 1993.

Hall, Stuart. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies. Ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. New York: Routledge, 1996. 465-75.

Harris, Chandler Joel. Uncle Remus His: Songs and His Sayings. New York : Penguin Books, 1982.

Harris, Trudier. Fiction and Folklore: the Novels of Toni Morrison. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1991.

Henderson, Mae G. "Toni Morrison's Beloved: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text." Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text. Ed. Hortense J. Spillers, New York: Routledge, 1991. 62-86.

Holloway, F.C. Carla. Codes of Conduct: Race, Ethics, and the Color of Our Character. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1995.

Howard, H. Wendell. "Chippewa and Catholic Beliefs in The Work of Louise Erdrich." Logos. 3.1 (2000): 111-123.

Hutcheon, Linda. The Politics of Postmodernism. London; New York: Routledge, 2002.

Irigaray, Luce. Speculum of the Other Woman. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

---, "This Sex Which is Not One." Trans. R. Albury and P. Foss, in Language,Sexuality, Subversion. Eds. Foss, Paul & Morris, Meaghan. Darlington: Feral Publications, 1978.

Kazuko, Ono. Chinese Women on a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950, ed. Joshua A. Fogel, Stanford: Stanford U Press, 1989.

Keenan, Sally. "'Four Hundred Years of Silence': Myth, History, and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Beloved." Recasting the World: Writing after Colonialism. Ed. Jonathan White. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993. 45-81.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a

Girlhood Among Ghosts. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Kristeva, Julia. About Chinese Women. Trans. Barrows, Anita. New York: Urizen Books, 1977.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Theory" (1949), in Écrits - A Selection, trans. Sheridan, Alan. New York: Norton,1977.

La Capra, Dominick. Ed. The Bounds of Race. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991.

Lee, Robert G. "*The Woman Warrior* as an Intervention in Asian American Historiography." 52-63.

---. Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999.

McKay, Nellie. "An Interview with Toni Morrison" in Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. The Phenomenology of Perception. tr. Colin Smith. London: Routledge, 2002.

Morey, Ann Janine. "Toni Morrison and the Color of Life." Christian Century. 16 Nov. 1988: 1039.

Morrison, Toni. Beloved. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1998.

---, Tar Baby. New York: Knopf; distributed by Random House, 1981.

---, Sula. New York, Knopf; distributed by Random House, 1974.

Newton, Huey. Revolutionary Suicide. New York: Ballantine, 1973.

Ng, W. Vivien. "Ideology and Sexuality: Rape Laws in Qing China," Journal of Asian Studies 46.1 (1987): 57-70.

Okihiro, Gary. Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1994.

Olson, Steve. "The Genetic Archeology of Race". The Atlantic Monthly. 287.4(2001): 69-80.

Omolade, Barbara. "Hearts of Darkness." In The Rising Song of African American Women. New York: Routledge, 1994.

O'Neale, Sondra. "Inhibiting Midwives, Usurping Creators: The Struggling Emergence of Black Women in American Fiction." Feminist Studies/Critical Studies. Ed. Teresa DeLaurentis. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 139-56.

Owens, Louis. Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, c1992.

Rayson, Ann. "Foreign Exotic or Domestic Drudge? The African American Woman in 'Quicksand' and 'Tar Baby.' (novels by African American women Nella Larson and Toni Morrison)." Melus. Summer 1998.

Rich, Cecile Adrienne. On Lies, Secrets and Silence. New York: Norton, (1995 printing), 1980.

Rollins, Judith. Between Women: Domestics and their Employers. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1985.

Rose, Tricia. Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994.

Sarason, Barbara R. and Irwin G. Sarason. Abnormal Psychology: The Problem of Maladaptive Behavior. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1996

Scruggs, Charles. "The Invisible City in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." Arizona Quarterly 48.3 9 (1995): 95-131.

Singh, Gee Alison. "A Life on the Brink." People. 55. 18 7 May 2001:85.

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 65-81.

Swann, Nancy. Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China. New York: Russell& Russell, 1968.

Tan, Amy. The Joy Luck Club. New York: Putnam, 1989.

Thompson, Garland Rosemarie. Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture. New York: Columbia UP, 1997.

T'ien Ju-k'ang, Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Ethical Values in Ming-Ch'ing Times, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988.

Walker, Alice. In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

Wallace, Michele. Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman. London: Verso Books, 1979.

Warner, Marina. Monuments and Maidens: the Allegory of the Female Form. New York: Atheneum, 1985.

Weaver, Jace. Other Words: American Indian Literature, Law and Culture. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2001.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820 - 1860." American Quarterly 18 (summer 1966): 151-74.

Wilson, Judith. "Conversations with Toni Morrison." Essence. July 1981.

Wolf, Naomi. The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women. New York : W. Morrow, 1991.

Wong, Nellie. "When I was growing up." Women: Images and Realities, a Multicultural Anthology. Eds. Kesselman, Amy; McNear D. Lily; Schnieder, Nancy. McGraw-Hill, 2002. 118-119.

Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon." The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions. Ed. David Palumbo-Liu. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995: 174-210.

Yuan, Yuan. "The Semiotics of China Narratives in the Con/texts of Kingston and Tan." Critique 40.3 (1999): 292-304.